Pan Books

GERRY ANDERSON'S

UFO 2

By ROBERT MIALL

BASED ON THE SUCCESSFUL ATV TELEVISION SERIES

S.H.A.D.O

Unidentified Flying Objects streak in from the lunar horizon and the savage noses of SHADO interceptors swing eagerly towards their flight path.

Any error now spelt death to a sleeping Earth.

Suddenly the link with Supreme Headquarters, Alien Defence Organization, slides away into a colour-splashed infinity—is Moonbase at the mercy of her enemies . . .?

In the same series by Robert Miall

UFO

ROBERT MIALL

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A PAN ORIGINAL

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UFO 2

1

THE DEAD surface flurried into a semblance of life. Dust stirred, contorted into a score of separate whirlwinds which united into one turbulent haze, and then settled again. The lunar module hung poised above its braking jets for a fraction of a second before touching down on the landing area. A light glowed a welcome beside the reception dome airlock.

Alec Freeman, swinging a small plastic case from two sinewy fingers, went swiftly through acceptance procedure and on into what Moonbase personnel had long ago dubbed Central Park. Here was a nostalgic pretence of open air and pleasant gardens, contrived within the artificial shell which projected them all from the lunar vacuum. Freeman always felt that he ought to trot out some conventional politeness—the flowering cherry's coming on nicely this year . . . I wonder if I might have a cutting from your rose-bush?

Lieutenant Gay Ellis was waiting for him, as sleek as ever. Living conditions here seemed to do her complexion and her shape no harm. No harm at all.

As sleek as ever? Or was there just a mite of unease behind those cool, appraising eyes?

Freeman said: 'Hello, Gay.'

'Colonel Freeman.'

Very formal today. She sensed that this was not altogether a routine monthly inspection. A point in her favour, really. It confirmed their judgement of her: whoever was in charge of Moonbase had to be alert, shrewd, resilient, and at least fifty per cent clairvoyant.

'How was the flight?' she asked.

'Smooth. Just give me five minutes to wash up.'

He was shown to an ablutions slot beside the compact little array of sleep cubicles. When he came out, Gay was sitting on the end of her bed. She got up at once.

'I thought you might like to start with the interceptor log.'

She was too quick, too anxious to have it over and done with. Freeman tried to slow the pace. 'If your quarters are all as comfortable as this,' he said, 'there's no room for complaints.'

'Who's complaining?'

If that was the way she wanted it, that was how she could have it. He came back: 'How's morale?'

'Excellent. Why do you ask?'

There had been a couple of minor mistakes recently. No serious consequences, but that was pure luck; and luck wasn't a factor you could feed into the defence programme. On Moonbase there was no room for luck and no room for error, no matter how small. A few seconds' delay in identifying the enemy, a slackening of attention as he raced in from outer space, and death would be on its way towards Earth.

They walked along the corridor towards the control sphere. Freeman glanced sideways at Gay. She moved like a lithe, flawlessly adjusted animal in the light gravity, seductive without having to make the effort to be so. Her head was held back, her lips were set; her chin might not be exactly aggressive but it was certainly determined.

She said: 'The spares situation might need reviewing. I'd like to see the levels kept a good twenty per cent higher.'

Freeman chalked up another mark to her. It was the very subject on which he had been ordered to sound her out. Straker himself had had the same idea.

So, it appeared, had the other girls in the control sphere. Freeman checked over their lists with them, agreed there was a danger of certain tracker spares running low, and promised a speeding-up of some unit modifications. This was how the monthly routine ought to go: sharp, efficient, mutually satisfactory. No cause for worry yet. No sign of anything off key. Yet.

'Sir.'

It was Joan Harrington. Her catsuit moulded to her like shimmering fur, she looked too languid to be on a job like this. But Freeman knew better. She had been one of his own nominees for Moonbase, and he had never had cause to regret it. On Earth perhaps he had regarded her with a not altogether official, dispassionate eye, and had even been tempted to find her an office desk not too far from his own; but up here, even more attractive in the simple uniform, she had kept herself apart—a skilled, dedicated operative in the service not of one man but of SHADO, Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organization.

Today, though, she sounded human and appealing. Respectful, but not quite so impersonal as on his recent inspection tours.

Freeman raised an eyebrow.

‘That personal requisition,’ said Joan: ‘did you take care of it?’

He wanted to keep her guessing, to tantalize her for just a few minutes. It was good to see her looking feminine for just that little while.

‘Personal requisition?’

‘It’s all right, sir.’

Now he could put her out of her suspense. But he found he was looking straight at Gay Ellis, not at Joan. And Gay looked, fleetingly, even more downcast than Joan had sounded.

Freeman reacted to it as to an alarm signal, without knowing what the alarm could be about.

Gay caught his gaze, and stiffened. She snatched a file up from the control desk and held it out. ‘The report. I think you’ll find everything in order.’

That was exactly what he found.

So there had been no mechanical fault to cause those two almost infinitesimal slips. No procedural error, no shoddy maintenance, no disciplinary slackness. Unless Gay was cooking the books, which was unthinkable.

So it had to be something personal, non-technical, indefinable. Mental disturbance? Freeman’s glance skimmed the girls at the panels and control decks. He’d have staked his life on their normality. In every way, he thought ruefully.

He wrenched his eyes and his mind away from them. It wasn’t actually written into SHADO regulations that you must not even *think* about women when you were on Moonbase service; but that kind of thinking was implicitly discouraged.

‘All right so far?’ asked Gay curtly.

‘All right so far.’

The three duty astronauts were relaxing in the dining sphere. They were fully equipped save for their space helmets, neatly arrayed beside the chute openings. Freeman had seen them in action before—too many times, racing to intercept Unidentified Flying Objects on too many destructive missions and he knew how fast they could move: gruelling training had taught them to leave their chairs, snatch up helmets, and leap feet-first into the chutes with one thrust of the arms, one flick of the toes against the floor.

He asked: ‘What sort of times are we making on interceptor launches now?’

Gay checked her file. ‘Been cutting down this last six months. One hundred and twenty-five seconds flat now.’

‘Not bad.’

The three pilots grinned dourly at each other. Freeman waited for some crack from one of them. He had invited it. But they looked too lazy, unhurried, unworried. Deceptive, the three of them: big, tough, apparently drowsy—but only because they knew how and when to conserve their energies. Most relaxed of all was Mark Bradley. His own brown face brought a touch of warmth to the air-conditioned, aseptic interior of the base. He was a long way from the West Indies, but looked utterly at home as he sprawled back and let the chair adjust obediently to his weight.

‘Well,’ said Freeman, ‘I think that about wraps it up for the month. I’ll report a clean bill of health.’

He could sense Gay’s relief. She snapped the file shut and put it to one side as though to make sure he didn’t change his mind.

‘And now,’ she said quickly, ‘if you’ll join us, we’ve arranged a little morale booster.’ Her voice acquired a faint, far-off echo as she thumbed the tiny transmitter switch at her throat. ‘Lieutenant Ellis here. Will all off-duty personnel come to the leisure sphere immediately. Dining area, leisure sphere immediately, please.’

Joan Harrington arrived first, as though she had been waiting for the summons. She was trying to conceal a small package behind her back. A grumbling astronaut came in, yawning. Two more girls followed, one zipping up her silver catsuit, the other running a hand through her tousled hair.

‘You celebrate Christmas at a different time of year up here?’ Freeman murmured.

‘Quiet, please.’ Gay edged into a position facing the three duty astronauts. ‘At 00.02 hours today we received a message from SID.’

Freeman saw that everyone else was as puzzled as he was. If you got a communiqué from SID, the computer which circled the Earth as Space Intruder Detector complementary to Moonbase, you didn’t gather people together for a chatty announcement: you broadcast orders—but fast—and got things moving.

‘It is reported,’ Gay went on, ‘that at 03.20 hours on November 4th, 1952, Mrs. Joan Bradley gave birth to a son.’

Freeman realized what was happening. So did Mark Bradley. ‘Oh, no . . .’

‘Today,’ said Gay, ‘is therefore the twenty-ninth birthday of astronaut Mark Bradley. Come over here, Mark.’

His face gleaming in the light, Mark got reluctantly to his feet. Joan was holding out her package, obviously a present. The off-duty astronaut began to clap and said: 'Let the old guy through there.' The girls closed in. 'Happy birthday, Mark.'

Gay said: 'We had planned another surprise for you, but there was a technical hitch.'

She looked accusingly at Freeman. He grinned back. He might have guessed why they had wanted him to carry out that little shopping expedition for them.

'A technical hitch?' he said. 'In SHADO? No room for error in this organization, no matter how small!' He swung the case from his fingers towards her. 'Maybe you'd care to open this, Lieutenant.'

Gay snapped the lid open to reveal a birthday cake and two bottles of champagne.

Freeman said: 'From the girls, Mark. Congratulations.'

Mark gravely lifted one of the bottles from its padding and studied the label. 'SHADO non-alcoholic champagne. That's nice. Mighty nice.'

'Not a drop is sold,' drawled one of his mates, 'till it's three weeks old.'

'Let's get some glasses.'

'And a stomach pump.'

The cork popped. There were cheers. Freeman held up his foaming glass.

'A toast. Mark Bradley.'

Joan Harrington came round the group towards him. 'Thanks, Colonel.' She kissed him.

'Hey,' Mark protested, 'I thought it was *my* birthday.'

The girl with tousled hair kissed him below the ear. Joan turned back towards him.

Astronaut Ken Matthews said boisterously: 'Come on, Lieutenant.'

Gay hesitated. Again the alarm bells rang in Freeman's head. If she hadn't hesitated, he wouldn't have heard or felt a thing. But for a fraction of a second she faltered. And then she smiled and went towards Mark Bradley, and he turned his face towards hers, and her lips were not as taut and decisive as Freeman had so recently seen them.

A voice boomed suddenly into the room, an urgent metallic voice which said:

'Green UFO bearing 062-415 green.'

The champagne bubbles tingled on the tongue, twirled less explosively up the glass. Ken Matthews put his glass down on a table. Lew Waterman's knuckles whitened. Mark Bradley, drinking to his own birthday, stared into nothingness and waited.

'Confirm sighting,' rasped the intercom. 'Yellow alert. I say again . . . yellow alert.'

Matthews and Waterman were already turning, heading for the chutes. Mark Bradley, caught for the first time in his SHADO career on the hop, tipped back his glass and held it out for someone to take.

Freeman took it.

The three men were on their way towards the chutes, Mark only a few feet in the rear. Waterman and Matthews grabbed their helmets. Gay Ellis, faster even than the astronauts, was holding the third helmet out.

'Good luck, Mark.'

So that was the way it was. Freeman watched the three men swoop down those delivery channels, knowing what waited for them at the other end: a quick swoop into the cockpits, the automatic clamps, the roar of the boosters and the predatory movement out into space of the fiery, dragon-belching interceptors.

Lieutenant Ellis and Astronaut Bradley: oh, decidedly not in the rule-book.

Gay Ellis was beside him. Her tone was clipped and impersonal. 'This is where I take over. Coming to see how we operate?'

It might have been a challenge. Come and find fault and then report me back to HQ, she might be saying. He hoped not. It was her business now to be a cool, calculating technician, a dedicated protector of her home planet, a potential killer of anyone or anything that menaced it. If she wasn't, she had no business to be here.

They went at the double towards the control sphere.

Gay settled herself at the master console. Joan Harrington was sitting in beside a duty operator. There was no question of anybody resenting intrusion, no question of anyone getting prickly or anyone pulling rank: snaring the incoming enemy was all that mattered. The dark girl who Freeman thought was called Nina—ten minutes ago he would have known what she was called, right now he had no time for personalities—was checking coordinates. They all waited for the tell-tale blip on the screen, for SID to holler trajectories and firing instructions, for everything to swing lethally towards that incoming spark . . . when there was some sign of it.

Somewhere out there in the bleak heavens the Space Intruder

Detector was scanning, estimating, plotting and preparing; yet was silent.

Definition on the screens was hazy, then sharpened again.

Gay said tensely: 'This sweep should tell us.'

Alec Freeman looked over her shoulder at the screen, sparking and crackling but still producing no definite trace.

The electronic accents of the computer shaped themselves into an unexcited message:

'Confirm Unidentified Flying Object 342-0784.'

The girls at the consoles flicked switches and played a sequence of buttons as though passing away the afternoon with some musical game.

Gay said into her microphone: 'Moonbase Control. Information Earth, action Moonbase. Red alert. I say again, red alert. Interceptors immediate launch. Immediate. Three . . . two . . . one.'

Within Moonbase there was no sound. But Freeman knew the astronauts had gone—knew it in every resonating bone of his body.

Still there was no blob, no bright threat on the screens.

He said tentatively: 'False alarm?'

'SID doesn't make mistakes,' said Gay.

Joan and the girl beside her looked simultaneously at each other. Joan said: 'We have possible contact. Bearing 342-047.'

'That'll be it,' said Gay. 'Hold it. Don't lose it.' She bent over the main panel. 'Base to interceptors. Have UFO on positive track. Speed SOL, bearing zero decimal eight. Repeat . . .'

The three hunters were in line, blasting out over the saw-toothed mountain ridges of the Moon. Relays flicked silently in their intestines, adjusting their course. The inexplicable terror spun in from the unfathomable deeps of the cosmos; they lined up on it, swung into position, waited for it.

'In range,' intoned the computer satellite, 'in fifty-one seconds.'

'Control to leader.' It was Gay Ellis, not inhuman but just as precise and unwavering as the computer. 'Set on-board analyser for the auto-count.'

It kept coming, steady and inexorable. The savage noses of the interceptors swung eagerly towards its flight path. At 150,000 miles a second it streaked out of eternity towards the scorching periphery of Earth's atmosphere.

‘Five seconds,’ said Mark Bradley from somewhere out there, somewhere where the battle was to be joined.

Alec Freeman stood shoulder to shoulder with Gay Ellis as they watched the screens. A man’s shoulder close to a woman’s warm shoulder, and it meant nothing. Only one thing mattered.

‘Have visual contact,’ said Mark’s voice in the receiver. ‘Explosion. Detonation positive.’

Freeman looked at Gay. Her head and shoulders were rigid. He turned to the others. The girls were intent on the screens.

Freeman said impatiently: ‘Did they get it?’

‘I still have a trace,’ said Nina.

‘Check,’ said Gay. ‘Double-check.’

‘Positive,’ said Nina.

‘Confirm,’ said Joan Harrington.

Gay’s breath sighed out in fury.

The voice of SID added itself to the report. ‘Predict UFO on collision course with interceptors. Impact 32 seconds. Closing. 25 seconds . . . 20 . . . 15 . . .’

Joan swung towards Gay. ‘Standard evasive action?’

‘No. Synchronous evasive action.’

Alec Freeman wanted to say something. He wanted to stop something—or start something. To say no, to say don’t dodge, to say go hell-for-leather at it and get it before it’s too late.

But when you appointed a Base Commander, you appointed a Commander.

‘New course.’ The voices were no longer those of girls he knew, no longer that calculated voice of a computer for ever rolling on its own axis out there in the void. Just calculations, tidy little adding machines who had to make the sum work out right or else . . . ‘New course Interceptor One 024-186.’

Echo confirmed obedience.

‘Course for Interceptor Two . . .’

As the coordinates went out, Ken Matthews was calling in: ‘Three to Base. Request new track.’

‘It’s close,’ said somebody. One of the girls bent towards the screen as though short-sighted, as though wanting to reach out and grab the slow yet ruthless specks of light. ‘If we don’t—’

‘Three to Base,’ Matthews was saying again.

Gay said: ‘One and Two—deflected?’

‘Lieutenant,’ cried Nina, ‘what about—’

‘Control to Interceptor Three,’ said Gay. ‘Turn on to—’

‘Lieutenant!’ Nina had one arm raised. They were all hypnotized by the cataclysmic pattern before their eyes. ‘It’s too late.’

Gay cried out into infinity: ‘Break formation!’

In here nothing seemed to happen for an eternity of impossible, uncountable seconds. Then two lines of light crept round in parallel arcs and trickled away towards the edge of the screen.

Two lines . . .

‘Report,’ said Gay tightly. ‘Interceptors—where are you? One?’

‘Evasion course. Lost contact.’

‘Two?’

‘Lost contact.’

‘Three?’

Three, thought Alec Freeman. The man called Matthews. Waterman was all right, Bradley’s voice he had recognized. Young Matthews—come on, Matthews, speak. Speak, will you? Come in, Matthews.

Gay Ellis said: ‘Come in, Three. Come in, Interceptor Three.’

A voice came in. It wasn’t the voice of Matthews. Unmoved, impersonal, pitiless and accurate, SID said:

‘Impact confirmed. Interceptor Three destroyed.’

It wasn’t so long since the cork had popped out of the celebratory bottle. A tiny fragment of a lifetime since they had laughed, and had been on the verge of singing ‘Happy birthday to you’ . . . and now one life had been snuffed out.

Not Mark Bradley’s.

Freeman stared at Gay Ellis. It had been her attack programme, her decision. The way they had peeled off, the sequence, the timing . . .

‘You’d better report,’ he said. ‘Report to SHADO Control—report what this means.’

She nodded. She was already leaning towards the transmitter.

What this meant. What it meant was that a UFO was through the outer defences and on its way to Earth.

2

THE STUDIO was involved in the production of a great 3-D spectacular which had managed to fit Ulysses, Queen Victoria, and Romeo and Juliet somehow into the same story. At least, that was how it looked to Alec Freeman as he walked in. A new sequence of blown-up stills was being fitted into the frames lining the foyer. The Harlington-Straker Corporation looked its usual busy, flamboyant, money-wasting self—so colourfully absurd that it just had to be true.

That was the big joke, if you could keep your sense of humour when the world was in danger from the unknown: the whole set-up was simply not true.

The receptionist blinked a new set of off-purple eyelashes at Freeman. 'Hello there, Mr Freeman.' She was always hoping he was going to give her a screen test. 'Haven't seen you for some time,' she cooed.

'Been on a trip.'

'An interesting one?' The eyelashes flapped demurely.

'Out of this world, doll, out of this world!'

He went through to Miss Ealand's office. Her eyelashes were the same as they had always been. Her expression conveyed the usual matey mistrust. Freeman patted her arm and dropped some letters on her desk.

'Mail from the Moon.'

'Any for me?'

'You have only to ask.'

'I read you.' She jerked her head towards the door of the inner office. 'You can go straight in.'

The directorial office was empty. It very often was. The big boss had a lot to do, in an office the general public never saw.

Freeman stood at the desk and said: 'Alec Freeman, SHADO.'

The disembodied analytical voice said: 'Voiceprint positive. Identification nine-seven. Freeman, Alec E.'

The room began to descend.

In the subterranean control room he was greeted by nods and a few snide cracks. There was another office door waiting for him. He went

through.

Straker was getting to his feet. Strangely enough, he was smiling. Strange, because he knew they had a crisis on their hands, and he wasn't a man to smile easily at the best of times. It didn't go with his bleached hair and his bleached eyes: with his steely, fanatical devotion to SHADO's cause.

'The silver boy himself,' he said. 'Congratulations, Alec.' When Freeman frowned, he went on smiling. 'I must admit I didn't know either, but the computer was good enough to remind me.' He pinned a small silver Moon emblem to Freeman's lapel. 'Twenty-five trips to the Moon. Join the club. Solid silver.'

'Thanks. I wasn't keeping count.'

Straker switched off the welcoming act. His tone hardened.

'Why?' he demanded.

Freeman took his time lighting a cigarette. It was only the cigarette that kept him from feeling like a kid hauled up in front of the headmaster, waiting for his punishment. 'You've read the report? I had it expressed.'

'An astronaut killed, a UFO through the outer defences. The report tells me what happened. I asked you why it happened.'

Freeman shook his head.

'I want to know,' Straker rasped. 'What the hell went wrong up there?'

'I don't really know.'

'Come on. I know you better than that.'

'Look,' Freeman hedged, 'it's like having a post-mortem on an international football match. One side has to lose. You can't win 'em all. It doesn't mean the home team is lousy—just that for once the other side was better. You don't blame anybody in particular.'

'Meaning?'

'I can't be sure.'

'I'll settle for an educated guess.'

'The error could have been human,' said Freeman. 'All right. One in a thousand. A decision was taken, it could have worked . . . the fact was it didn't.'

Straker looked at him, looked right into him, stirred his guts up.

Finally he said: 'I want the personnel concerned, the two surviving astronauts and Lieutenant Ellis, back here on the next Moonflight.'

'Who do we send out in their place?'

‘I leave that to you.’

‘We could put Paul Foster in temporary command. Give him the experience. Better than promoting one of the girls up there and then having to shunt her aside when Gay Lieutenant Ellis—goes back.’

‘*If* Lieutenant Ellis goes back.’

Freeman let that one ride. Then he said: ‘What happened to the UFO?’

‘We tracked it into Earth’s atmosphere. But it came right down. Contact was lost in a radar blindspot.’

‘You mean—’

‘I mean we lost it, too. But one thing’s certain: it landed.’

‘Landed? Where?’

Freeman had a brief, horrific vision of a city devastated, of the public learning at last what the menace was—of the panic that SHADO had fought so bitterly to avoid for so many years, working always in secrecy, shielding the human race not only from the enemy but from awareness of the enemy’s existence.

‘One of the most inaccessible places you could choose,’ said Straker. ‘Somewhere in a 50,000-square-mile area of Northern Canada. Everything we’ve got that flies is searching now.’

The planes swooped over the great forests, shattering the vast silences and trailing echoes away over the hills. Moose raised their heads, bellowed, and stampeded. Smaller animals crackled through the undergrowth, slithered over rocks, cowered away. High up, vapour trails wrote indecipherable messages on the sky; messages that faded as hope faded.

There was no sign of the UFO. Yet it had to be down there somewhere.

Skydiver nosed its way up the Hudson Strait. Below the surface, the lethal warhead of Sky 1 pulled away from the submarine and streaked up like a great leaping salmon—a salmon that went on, up and up, instead of curving back into the water.

The grid search went on. Still there was nothing to report. In SHADO’s subterranean headquarters, Freeman stood by Straker and watched the sparkling dots on the great wall-chart. The pattern made no sense yet. All accurate, and all still meaningless.

A satellite orbiting above its Canadian sector began to take pictures and relay them at ten-second intervals.

They showed nothing.

Nothing, until in a lake shielded by snow-covered mountains the water began to boil.

The sensitive, insubstantial fingers of the radar fixes settled on it as it rose—a hot, spinning ellipse, tossing seething water off its revolving body like a dog shaking itself. Steam surged like an unnatural fog across the placid surface of the lake, which became for a few seconds a bubbling cauldron. The UFO made a wavering ascent over the white peaks of the range.

Coordinates assembled their message in SHADO headquarters. Pinpoints of light formed new groups and began to stream in towards the brightest dot, the new dot that hadn't been there a moment before but now dominated the huge screen.

'Speed and altitude way down,' Freeman observed. 'The Moonbase interceptors must have damaged it.'

'Alert squadron . . .'

'Alert Sky 1.'

Sky 1 had rejoined its parent submarine. Now, once again, it broke surface, this time in a purposeful, vengeful rush.

Messages chattered out into the heavens; reports bounced back. 'Steering 042 . . . intercept in 18 minutes . . . latest fix make it 043 . . . range 80 miles, closing . . .' The lights were clustering in. On the chart it was bright and precise. In the Canadian night sky there was darkness tinged with a faint glow along the eastern rim of the world. As Peter Carlin soared higher, the light intensified. He watched his instrument panel, listened to the tracking adjustments from Control, and every now and then peered ahead through the dissolving night. He didn't just want to see blips on a screen, hear dispassionate orders: he wanted to see the UFO for himself and go at it and blast it out of the skies. His sister had died because of the aliens. Her body had been used by the aliens. Nothing could ever even up the score; but he meant to keep trying.

'Have visual contact,' he said suddenly. 'Closing for attack.'

It was there, a blob of light, less clear than a star but closer and more accessible than a star. And this was one star that was going to fall from the firmament.

Sky 1 raced in. The UFO made an abrupt lunge to one side. The vicious beak of Sky 1 followed it round, and raged fire. Two missiles sped across the void.

The UFO reeled. It seemed to spin over on its side, and drop. Peter Carlin banked, and looked down. The dot was still there, falling, but still in one piece. It ought to have disintegrated into a thousand shreds

over the illimitable nothingness.

Sky 1 plunged, reporting as it went.

The messages began to spit to and fro again.

'Sky 1 reports hit. But UFO is turning. Still airborne.'

'Report new trajectory . . .'

'All radar stations. All trackers.' It was urgent, incisive. 'UFO hit but still airborne. Orders from Commander Straker, if it's lost this time radar tracker controllers will answer to him personally.'

The UFO scorched through the terrestrial atmosphere, out of control. It spun perilously down the long slope of a mountain, churned up snow, and crashed through a line of firs. When it came to rest on the inhospitable, rocky terrain, it was tilted to one side, wedged in between shattered tree trunks and the jagged spur of a bare hillside.

It wouldn't lift off again. It lay there, waiting.

The two men and the woman stood stiffly to attention before Straker's desk.

He said: 'I assume you all know why you're here?'

'I'd like to say something, sir.' Mark Bradley stared rigidly ahead. 'As interceptor leader I want to accept complete and sole responsibility for what happened.'

'Very gallant. But out of line. I know what happened. I still want to know why.' Straker paced round his desk and inspected them one by one as though to gouge the truth out of them. 'You were all selected for outstanding qualities of character as well as intellect. You were given the toughest training we can devise, and you came through splendidly. The equipment on Moonbase is faultless. So far *you've* all been faultless. This time it all went wrong. We have to find out why. I'm handing you over to Dr Shroeder.'

As they left the office, Lew Waterman said shakily to Mark Bradley: 'Sounds like a death sentence.'

'Or something worse.'

Gay Ellis didn't utter a word.

3

THE VISUAL report told its merciless, coolly unbiased story on the screen. Alec Freeman sat beside Dr Shroeder in the projection room and watched it as he might have watched the unedited rushes of a forthcoming Harlington-Straker film. Only this production was for real.

It began in the interrogation room, divided by a glass partition to make a soundproof area in which Shroeder carried on his inquiries. The outer area was equipped with a small computer for record and instant analysis, and two chairs where people under test could sit.

In the opening scene—Freeman couldn't help thinking of it as a calculated drama rather than a spontaneous documentary—Shroeder had Gay Ellis and the two astronauts in his inner office. If they guessed that a camera eye was also watching them, they showed no sign of it.

Shroeder's rimless glasses threw back a spark of light, concealing his eyes. Freeman did not regret the camouflage. Just before they sat down to watch the record of the interviews, Shroeder had methodically wiped those glasses and Freeman had seen his eyes. They were not comfortable eyes. There was no cruelty in them—simply a stony, clinical curiosity. He wouldn't have cared to have them raking over his own subconscious.

'Now you will see,' said the real Shroeder, beside him. And on the screen the image of Shroeder was saying blandly: 'So you will be glad to know that you are all three in perfect health . . . physically.' He nodded as though this were all due to his own kindness. 'Well, you've all done the next bit during your training and probation periods, so there's nothing to be alarmed about. Lieutenant Ellis, Astronaut Waterman, I'd like you to begin the computer test whilst I interview Astronaut Bradley.'

Gay Ellis and Lew Waterman moved into the adjoining section and settled themselves before the computer. Shroeder checked the connection to his inner room, then walked slowly round Mark Bradley. Silently he took out a cigarette case and moved close to Mark, and said sharply: 'Cigarette?'

Mark didn't jump; but Freeman could detect the momentary danger, could see the effort he had had to make—and could sense Shroeder's

smug enjoyment.

'Thank you,' said Mark, taking a cigarette.

'Nervous?'

'No.'

'No need to be. This is all quite confidential.'

Liar, said Freeman silently.

Shroeder went on: 'Before we start, let's just get one thing straight.' He spun on his heel, and spat out: 'I hate you black sons of bitches.'

Mark did not react.

'Have you ever heard that phrase,' said Shroeder, 'or anything similar on Moonbase?'

'Never.'

'You didn't seem surprised when I said it.'

'I assumed *you* didn't mean it.'

'Good. Good.' It was a punctuation mark rather than sincere praise. 'Now. Word association. Ready?'

Mark nodded.

Shroeder said crisply: 'Father.'

'Mother.'

'Hot.'

'Cold.'

'Geometry.'

'Variable.'

'Hm?' Shroeder was briefly disconcerted, then nodded. 'Ah, yes. You were a pilot down here before you became an astronaut. Of course. Right . . . apple.'

'Teacher.'

'Sun.'

'Moon.'

'Tree.'

'Pine.'

'Hate,' said Shroeder.

'Love,' said Mark.

'Love.' Shroeder made a note on his pad. 'Good.'

When the interview was concluded, Mark went out to take his place beside Gay Ellis, while Waterman took his place in the inquisition room. The camera lingered on Gay and Mark, but they merely glanced

at each other and then looked away.

Freeman offered Shroeder a cigar. The doctor puritanically shook his head. On screen he was smoking, but it appeared to be for effect rather than for pleasure.

They watched the same routine with Lew Waterman. Freeman could spot nothing out of the ordinary. He waited for the interrogator, sitting next to him, to elucidate, but Shroeder was content so far to let the film speak for itself. It was a pity it should be conveying so little message.

The three Moonbase personnel were together in the outer office for a minute or two while Shroeder scribbled on his pad.

Waterman said: 'Well, that was quick. He tells me I'm cleared and I'm scheduled on the next flight back to the Moon.'

Still Gay and Mark studiously did not look at each other.

'He's the one who needs looking at,' Waterman added.

Mark glanced apprehensively at the glass partition.

'Oh, don't worry—he can't hear in that glass case he calls his office. Tell me something . . . do SHADO have anyone checking *him out?'*

'If they did,' said Mark, 'it'd probably be a damned computer.'

Beside Freeman, Shroeder chuckled and shifted in his seat. On screen, he called: 'Lieutenant Ellis, will you come in, please?'

Freeman tensed. If anything was to come out of this ritual, it had to come now.

The word-association game began once more.

Shroeder said: 'Mahogany.'

'Table.'

'Grass.'

'Green.'

Shroeder nudged Freeman. 'Watch this next one carefully. Most interesting reaction.'

His other voice said: 'Sunrise.'

'Morning.'

'Black.'

Gay opened her mouth, then hesitated. The pause seemed to last forever, to become a gaping chasm.

'Black?' Shroeder prompted.

'Bird,' said Gay.

Shroeder looked puzzled.

‘Blackbird,’ said Gay.

‘Blackbird. Ah, yes. Yes, I see.’

The scene went on, but Shroeder reached for a light switch and dimmed the volume of the soundtrack.

‘Well?’ he said triumphantly.

‘Well?’ said Freeman.

‘A 2.04-second delay. You could almost see her mind racing. She consciously avoided giving the standard answer white. And now look at this.’ He was reaching for a tangle of paper which had been clipped from the computer output. ‘Look at the stress reaction at this point. Here . . .’

Freeman looked. There was undoubtedly a crazy peak on the stress counter wave.

‘Five times normal,’ said Shroeder.

‘And you’re basing your conclusions on that?’

‘I am basing my conclusions on eight hours of exhaustive tests. You may see the rest if you wish. I have singled out the relevant sections merely to clarify the issue. Eight hours,’ Shroeder repeated, ‘not to mention twenty years of experience *and* the conclusions formed by the computer. That example I showed you was one I thought even a layman might understand.’

‘You’ve reported to the commander?’

‘Naturally. I do not know if he has had time to read it yet. He has other things on his mind.’

In brisk confirmation of this, the speaker above their heads crackled into life. ‘Colonel Freeman to report to Commander Straker at once, please. Urgent. Colonel Freeman to report to Commander Straker.’

Alec Freeman was on his way as fast as an astronaut leaping for the delivery chute.

Straker was holding a drink in his right hand. Freeman stared. Knowing the Commander’s austerity, he had never expected to see such a sight.

Straker thrust out the glass. ‘For you.’

‘Thanks.’ Freeman tasted it warily. ‘What’s it for—a celebration, or softening some hideous blow?’

‘The UFO landed again. But this time we know where.’

‘Great. Exact position?’

‘More or less. Within a mile or so.’

‘Great,’ said Freeman again. ‘Where?’

‘Close enough to Lexfield Air Base, Canada, for you to be out there at first light tomorrow.’

Freeman took a larger gulp of the drink. This was quite an assignment.

Straker said intensely: ‘I want them, Alec. Alive.’

Freeman wondered if there was any chance of a refill. ‘I’ll . . . do what I can,’ he said.

‘That’s right. You will. You’ll be field commander, I’ll monitor the whole operation from here. Central Control will give you all the details, and if there are any changes—if the aliens try anything—you’ll know before they as much as sneeze.’

‘Right.’

‘Just one more thing.’

Freeman restrained a sigh. Collecting a batch of aliens and getting them back intact to headquarters ought, he considered, to be regarded as enough of a task for one day.

Straker said: ‘I’ve read Dr Shroeder’s report. I reckon I see what it adds up to. I’d like you to handle it . . . and this is the way I want it done . . .’

Gay Ellis and Mark Bradley stood before him, as stiff and hostile as they had stood before Straker. Freeman felt uncomfortable enough without this kind of atmosphere. He said:

‘Sit down.’

They pulled up chairs and sat down.

‘I won’t waste time with the details of the report we’ve received on you,’ he said. ‘You’ll be given copies. But I’d like to read you the conclusions.’

They were seated but they were not at ease. Their faces were set into rigid masks. He felt that something might crack at any minute.

He cleared his throat and kept his gaze on the paper rather than on the two of them.

‘One. Taking into account the circumstances at the time of detonation it was clearly the duty of Lieutenant Ellis to decide the type of attack or evasive action to be taken. On that count Lieutenant Ellis is cleared.’ Before Gay could look too happy about it, he added: ‘Provided that the decision was in no way influenced by emotional factors. Which brings us to point two.’

Now he allowed himself to glance up. They hadn’t moved a muscle, either of them. Which was suspicious in itself.

‘Two,’ said Freeman. ‘The personnel concerned were subject to standard psychiatric and psycho-computer tests, with the following results. Astronaut Lew Waterman, clear on all counts. Astronaut Mark Bradley, emotion count 48 para normal, clear on other counts. Lieutenant Ellis . . . stress count factor 128 para normal, emotion count 35 para normal. Clear on other counts.’ Now he could tell they were quivering. ‘Three,’ he said: ‘these results are attributed to an emotional attachment between Lieutenant Ellis and Astronaut Bradley. The reports ends with a confidential recommendation as to what action should be taken.’

He closed the file.

Mark Bradley tried to make it sound slow, easy and unresentful. He didn’t make much of a success of it. ‘Let me get this straight, sir. What exactly do they mean—an emotional attachment?’

‘As I see it, this report finds an embryo relationship between you that could develop.’

‘Into what?’

‘Look, it’s not my report. I’m just telling you.’

‘Without any disrespect to Mark,’ said Gay, ‘if the computer’s saying we’re in love then it must be out of its tiny electronic mind.’

‘There must be some way round this,’ said Mark. ‘Can’t we appeal?’

‘I’m afraid you can’t.’

‘You mean it’s just . . . like that?’

‘If you can disprove the findings,’ said Freeman, ‘then I might be able to do something. But you’ve got,’—he didn’t suppose they would understand the sardonic echo—‘eight hours of exhaustive tests, and twenty years of Dr Shroeder’s experience, and the conclusions of a pretty efficient computer to beat.’

He got up. They sprang to their feet. They were hating him, and Alec Freeman didn’t much like being hated.

‘That’s just dandy,’ said Mark. ‘Tried and convicted by a heap of printed circuits.’

Freeman said: ‘Off the record . . . but I want a straight answer. Is there anything in it?’

‘No, sir,’ said Gay.

‘No, sir,’ said Mark.

‘Let’s just hope it sorts itself out, then. In the meantime, the Commander has ordered that you be given separate positions. Bradley, you will shortly be returned to Moonbase.’

Gay flinched. ‘And me?’

‘SHADO headquarters, Earth. For the time being, anyway. And you’ve both been given three days’ leave.’

‘And suppose we don’t want leave?’ snarled Mark. It was the first sign he had given of being ready to crack, to lash out.

‘You’re being given leave. That’s an order.’

‘Go and enjoy yourself, or else?’

Freeman hadn’t enjoyed one single little minute of it. He wondered if that was why Straker had given him the distasteful job—to humble him, to make him bow down even more in the service of the great god SHADO. Maybe Straker himself would have enjoyed it.

When he reported to Straker he tried to read in that competent, unyielding face the answer to a lot of questions. And learned nothing.

‘Everything’s lined up with the Air Force,’ said the Commander. ‘Full cooperation all the way. You all set?’

‘All set.’

‘Decided who you’re taking along with you?’

Freeman knew then, in a flash, that he had in fact decided just that. He said: ‘Leave it to me.’

‘Sure.’ Straker couldn’t resist it. ‘Just that I haven’t seen the list of personnel.’

‘It hasn’t been dictated yet.’

‘And when it is?’

‘It includes Lieutenant Ellis,’ said Freeman, ‘and Mark Bradley.’

Straker gave him a long, freezing look. ‘Your decision, Alec.’

‘That’s right. My decision. Without the help of a computer. They’ll be back inside three days to take up their new postings.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

‘Any time you have any doubts, all you have to do is—’

‘No. It’s all yours.’

‘Let’s just hope,’ said Freeman, ‘that there’s still some thing alive inside that space vessel. Alive . . . but not too damn lively.’

4

SHADO MOBILES lurched out through the forest, crunching branches and making a path where there had never been a path before. Chunks of rock spurted from beneath their treads.

In the control vehicle, Alec Freeman and Gay Ellis hunched over a portable console and waited for the first announcement of a sighting. Ahead in the lumbering scout cars, a young lieutenant scanned one mountainous vista, Mark Bradley kept parallel and waited to clear a ridge. There was no radio discussion yet. Nothing to talk about until they established contact. Then there would be purely technical decisions: facts, figures and approach routes.

The first mobile skidded down a slope. The second breasted the ridge and went over into a little gully, sheltering below the exposed skyline.

'SHADO Mobile 1 to Control,' said Mark Bradley. 'In position. No visual contact.'

'Hold it there,' returned Freeman. 'Flow are you making out, SM 2?'

'A hundred yards to go.'

'SM 3?'

The third car was behind the others, striking out at a tangent to come up on the flank of that little blob where all the radar fixes met. At last it reported. 'In position.'

'Still no sighting,' muttered Freeman. Then he sat back. 'But that's where it's got to be. Right, Lieutenant Ellis. Send it in.'

Gay said: 'Which mobile, sir?'

'The one in the best position,' said Freeman steadily. 'Standard procedure.'

He had spelled it out for her, and knew that she knew it. Without raising her head she followed the winking tracks of the scout cars. Finally she said:

'Control to SM 3. Close in for final assault.'

Freeman stood up and stared out through the heavy, concussion-proof windscreen slit, willing the landscape to clear, straining to get a good straight look at what he knew darned well couldn't be visible from here. Way out in front there, a mobile would be lumbering on

towards the UFO. He would sooner have been with it than in here: would sooner, almost, have gone for the aliens with his bare hands than have to sit back and play this remote game of chess.

They must be close now. *Must* be.

'Have visual contact,' said the lieutenant's voice in the speaker. 'About 300 yards ahead. No sign of movement. Going in.'

'Take it easy,' commanded Freeman. 'At the first sign of trouble, get back under cover. Fast. We want them alive—and we want *you* alive.'

'Thanks for the thought, Colonel.'

Then nothing. Freeman's eyes ached. He closed them, and dreamed up a picture of the mobile swaying down a hillside towards a motionless metallic object—no longer an Unidentified Flying Object, but a still, crippled, identifiable alien.

'Go get it,' he whispered between his teeth.

There was a harsh sizzling sound from the speaker, followed by the young man's voice with an edge to it, but no panic. 'SM 3 to Control. We are under attack.'

'If they get back behind the ridge,' said Gay, 'they ought to be out of the line of fire.'

'Tell them,' said Freeman.

She told them.

There was a lull, then: 'We are still under fire. Carved up a section of rock right in front of us. Nasty gash across the ledge. They seem to be using some sort of—'

Then there was a strange, far-off sigh, and nothing.

Gay said: 'SM 3. Complete message, please.'

Silence.

Freeman added his plea to hers. 'Come in, SM 3. Can you hear me? Come in.'

Gay checked the console. Her head sank. As Freeman turned away, not daring to curse, not trusting himself to make a sound, she said: 'Radio link negative. They must have been hit.'

'You'll have to send another one in.'

She slewed round to look questioningly at him.

'I know the risk,' he said. 'Send it in.'

'Yes, sir.' She forced herself to look at the two remaining dots. From where Freeman stood, there appeared to be little to choose between them. He waited for her decision. She said: 'Control to SM 1. Close in on UFO.'

Mark Bradley's response was immediate. 'Roger.'

Freeman leaned over Gay. 'This is Freeman. We have to assume SM 3 is non-operational. Don't waltz straight into trouble. Stop just below the top of the ridge and proceed on foot.'

'Understood.'

The three men fanned out, one on each side of Mark Bradley, keeping a twenty-yard distance as steadily as the ragged, unpredictable ground would let them. Mark raised his binoculars to his eyes every few steps, and the other men slowed their pace, their hands tightening and slackening on the butts of their automatics.

Less than a quarter of a mile. Twigs snapped; they froze. Then on again. A couple of hundred yards. Closing in.

The going was getting rough. Mark lost sight of the young technician away to his left. He wanted to shout and call him in closer, but daren't risk it. He veered off in pursuit. The youngster was not used to this kind of thing: on his own he could do something foolish.

Through the clump of bushes which had separated them he saw the technician.

And saw the other creature straightening up out of hiding.

Instinctively Mark let out a yell. The alien's pallid, milky eyes swam behind the swirling green liquid in its helmet, and it seemed to hesitate. Then the translucent visor turned towards the technician, who jerked up his gun and fired.

The alien's helmet shattered; a trickle of green ooze began to flow from one wide crack. The creature put up its arms helplessly, stumbled, and then went staggering off.

Mark said: 'Get it!' But the young Earthman seemed petrified. He was yards behind Mark when they floundered after the stricken alien. The mobile driver came running in from the other flank.

The alien went down.

They reached him and bent over him.

Mark transmitted: 'Have hit alien. Helmet broken. Don't know if we can keep him alive.'

Flame gushed suddenly, savagely, from a rock a few feet away. There was no sound, no crack of rifle or whine of impact: just a gout of scorching white heat.

'Down!'

They flung themselves to the ground, rolled away. Flame like a playful animal skipped across the rocks after them.

Mark rolled under cover. A ball of fire exploded away to his right. But this time he had been able to estimate the direction from which the attack came.

'Cover me,' he called.

Spontaneous flame erupted within a bush. As it began to rage, he crawled round the rocks and on through the undergrowth. There was the snap of a gun, a deeper resonance off the mountainside, and again a fireball out of nowhere.

It took him three interminable minutes to get round behind the alien. When he came out into the little clearing, it all became too easy. The creature was firing from what looked like a stumpy rifle whose grandparents must have included a set of bagpipes. Its head turned, it began to scramble up, but Mark was already throwing himself forward. All he had to do was smash the helmet against the rock, smash it to pieces until the life-retaining fluid ran out and the creature gasped for its strange, unnatural breath, and aged, and died in agony. Another one to balance out what had happened to Leila.

But SHADO wanted this one alive.

Mark kicked the fire gun away, rammed the alien's helmet against the ground, and held it there. 'You fellers can come in now,' he called. Thankfully the driver and the technician made their way up the slope and stood above him, eyeing the captive warily.

They manhandled it back to the truck. It was limp, apparently incapable of resistance. Only once did it stiffen and tug against their arms—and that was when a high-pitched pulsation began to throb through the forests, striking screaming discord from the peaks. A glow in the sky turned into bright, white heat. Devouring flame rose in a column from somewhere half a mile to the west. You couldn't see what it was but Mark could guess. The UFO was liquefying in automatic destruction procedure.

But they'd got a live alien.

Freeman was waiting, standing with his arms folded to control his impatience. He watched them bump back down the track they had carved for themselves on the way out.

'Still breathing?' he demanded.

'If that's what you call it.'

'I've alerted the airfield. Chopper on the way already. Where's our friend?'

Mark jerked a thumb towards the interior of the mobile. As Freeman went towards it, Gay Ellis got down from the control mobile.

'Hello, Mark.'

‘Hi.’

‘Quite a day.’

‘You can say that again.’

‘Subdued, she said: ‘Are you . . . all right?’

‘I’m fine.‘

‘Mark, there’s something . . . something I must tell you.’

Freeman looked into the interior of the mobile, then looked back at them.

‘After SM 3 was hit,’ Gay went on, ‘Freeman told me to send another one in. Mobile 2 was in a better position.’

Mark nodded.

‘Don’t you understand what I’m saying?’ she insisted.

‘Sure. You did it to prove that Straker and the computer were wrong.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s OK. I was glad of a bit of action.’

‘Mark, I risked your life to prove something. But what have I proved?’

Freeman was returning. There was nothing Mark could say in front of him—maybe nothing whatsoever to be said anyway.

Freeman climbed back into the control mobile and began to report to headquarters. Soon they would be on their way, with their precious cargo.

Straker said: ‘Well?’

They were in the underground office. Freeman was tired, but not so tired that he wanted to miss what the doctor had to report.

‘Much the same situation as we’ve experienced before,’ said Dr Murray. ‘The alien was breathing liquid containing a bio-acryphilic compound imparting the usual green tint to the face and neck. The hair was unaffected and the eyes had protective shells. We’ve managed to revert the respiration to normal atmosphere.’

‘Successfully?’

‘Five hours isn’t long enough to tell.’

Freeman sighed. They knew from past experience that once the aliens breathed Earth’s atmosphere they reverted to their true age in twenty-four hours, no longer cocooned in the preservative fluid. Nobody could have come a billion miles across space without that shielding and slowing down of the metabolism; and once here, nobody

could adjust to terrestrial conditions without losing that protection.

He ventured: 'If it has survived for five hours, we must be dealing with a comparatively young specimen.'

'Just so. I want to see if I can get anything out of it.' Straker turned to the doctor. 'When will it be ready?'

'We're crossing new physiological frontiers. How can I say?' He withstood Straker's dissatisfied glare for a moment, then conceded: It's as ready as it'll ever be, I suppose'.

'Let's go.'

As they approached the medical centre, Straker said: 'This is what I've been waiting for, Alec. We had a chance at one of them before, remember? And lost it. But with a younger one—one that might hold up a bit longer—we stand a chance. Face to face . . .'

Shorn of its spacesuit the alien looked pathetically flimsy. The angular features were as near human as made no odds, but the green-tinged skin was smoother than human skin. There was no enmity, no fear, no hatred: the creature was in a peaceful coma.

Straker's fists clenched and unclenched. At last he put one gloved hand under the invader's chin and turned the face towards his own.

'You will answer my questions,' he said slowly.

The eyes opened. Now the face was no longer peaceful. The opaque eyes stared—and threatened? Freeman couldn't decide. How could you tell what emotions were registered by a creature which did not belong to your own world, your own way of life?

'Where do you come from?' asked Straker. 'What is your objective in coming to Earth?'

Dr Murray said: 'We have no evidence that it understands our language, or even that its methods of communication are related to ours.'

Straker reached out and took a glass beaker from the nearest bench. He dropped it, and it exploded into fragments. The alien on the operating table flinched and turned its head, then lay still again.

'It heard that all right,' said the Commander. 'And you've told me yourself that its vocal chords are in excellent condition. We *know* they must have some method of interpreting what we say. Some of those early incidents, in the days when they got right through to Earth . . . the kidnappings, the use they made of human tissue, the way they operated . . . infiltrated . . . they *had* to be able to think and hear and speak in our terms.' He stared down into the unresponsive face. 'There's no alternative. I'm going to try a truth drug.'

'I'm not sure that I could recommend that.'

‘Doctor, do you realize just what a chance we have here? All these years we’ve spent, the billions and billions of dollars in military appropriations, the deaths, the secrecy what’s it all for? We have to know why these things come here—and what we have to do to stop them. All I’m asking from you is the drug.’

‘I can’t guarantee the result. The decision and the responsibility will have to be yours.’

‘I’ve never wanted it any other way.’

Murray turned to a cabinet above the bench and unlocked it. He took out a hypodermic, filled it from a phial, and turned back reluctantly towards the alien. The needle drove into the white, hairless arm. Once the eyes flickered, then were uncommunicative again.

Straker paced up and down the room for two minutes, two and a half minutes; and then stood beside the operating table once more.

‘Where do you come from? What was your purpose in coming to Earth?’

The alien’s lips trembled. The colourless tip of its tongue quivered between them.

Alec Freeman felt his own nails biting into the palms of his hands.

Straker leaned closer. ‘Where do you come from?’

The mouth worked. Lips opened, breathing became faster. Words must lie there, waiting, threshing to be liberated.

Suddenly the eyes widened, swimming with a milky horror. The alien’s mouth yawned and emitted a weird, high screech. Its head twisted to and fro, trying to free itself from some invisible torment.

Then there was stillness and silence.

Murray bent over the body. The sag of his shoulders told the others all they needed to know.

Freeman and Straker went back to the office.

Straker looked automatically at his desk, and picked up two messages from Miss Ealand and a report in a shiny grey file.

‘Drink?’ he said abstractedly.

‘No thanks.’

There was a long silence between them. Straker began to turn the pages of the file’s contents. Freeman could not tell whether he was reading them or not.

Abruptly Straker said: ‘You hate my guts, don’t you?’

‘I—’

‘You don’t really think I *wanted* him to die?’

‘No. You wanted information.’

‘It was a calculated risk.’

‘The computer wouldn’t have faulted you,’ said Freeman sourly.

‘Meaning what?’

‘You base all your decisions on cold logic. On computer predictions. Oh, and a few calculated risks, of course. All very scientific. The trouble is, I’ve still got a few human emotions left.’

Straker slammed the file down. ‘You think it’s easy,’ he blazed. ‘So it is—for you, not for me. Your conscience is clear. You sleep nights. I can’t. I’m the guy in the responsibility seat. I need all the help I can get. If machines, logic, computers, the lot, can give it to me—’

‘But can they?’

Straker sank down into his chair. ‘Tell Lieutenant Ellis and Astronaut Bradley they are to return to Moonbase immediately to resume normal duties.’

‘Both of them?’

‘Both of them.’

‘That’s not what the report recommended.’

‘That’s not what the first report recommended.’ Straker tapped the file he had been skimming through. ‘This report analysed the flight paths, and it shows that if standard procedure had been followed we would have lost all three interceptors.’

‘You mean her decision was not influenced by emotion?’

‘You tell me.’

It was no answer. No answer to Freeman’s question, or to the deeper questions he asked himself about the Commander. So the computer had come up with something different; so Straker changed his mind like a relay clicking into place.

He said: ‘If you’re willing to listen to a bit of human advice—not off a printout . . .’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Lieutenant Ellis is due for leave. Let her take it now. Give Paul Foster a good breaking-in while he’s up there.’

‘Good for Foster, yes. And for Lieutenant Ellis?’

‘Maybe you’d like to have Shroeder in again. And alert data processing. Or send the details out to SID and let him cast her horoscope.’

‘I suppose it wouldn’t occur to you,’ said Straker, ‘that among the

aids, mechanical and otherwise, on which I base my decisions, I rate Alec Freeman—'

The buzzer on the desk interrupted him. Freeman was relieved. For a moment there had seemed to be a danger of the Commander actually uttering a word of embarrassingly personal praise; and that would have spoiled Freeman's image of him.

Miss Ealand was saying in her usual slightly injured, defensive tone: 'I've been trying to keep Mr Blake at bay, but he's getting awfully insistent.'

'Blake?' Straker tried to adjust to a fresh subject.

'Of Dalotek. You know, the one who—'

'Oh, yes,' said Straker grimly. 'I know who. Miss Ealand, you may tell Mr Blake that my recommendations have already gone to higher authority and there is nothing I can possibly discuss with him. He doesn't go to the Moon, and that's that.'

Miss Ealand's amplified sniff was cut off as Straker thumbed the switch.

'Dalotek?' hazarded Freeman. 'The big refining combine on the Moon?'

'That's the whole point. They do not go on the Moon. All the mineral deposits of any value were located and developed under proper supervision long ago. And right now, the last thing we want is some private corporation rooting about up there.'

'Difficult to explain to them why not.'

'I don't have to do any explaining,' said Straker, 'That's what General Henderson is for.'

'Is *that* what he's for?'

They both grinned wryly.

'He can tell them we've got radioactive materials up there, or that we're carrying out secret experiments to make the world safe for democracy from . . . well, from anyone he feels like slandering while he's in the mood.'

'But not from UFOs.'

'Not from UFOs. There's no such thing. As far as the rest of the world's concerned, they don't exist.'

'Dalotek have a lot of money to throw around. If they're really determined to carry out a survey—'

'Don't! It doesn't bear thinking of. Aliens coming in from one direction, nosey geologists and exploitation teams from another . . .' Straker groaned, then rapped out: 'And what are you doing hanging

about here, spreading gloom and despondency?'

'I thought—'

'And *I* thought,' said Straker, 'that you were going to issue Lieutenant Ellis with her revised instructions.'

5

PAUL FOSTER had been on duty at the main console for six hours. Nothing had happened, but he was tired. Maybe that was why he was tired: there was nothing more wearying than nothing.

Joan Harrington passed, laying a chart on the side leaf of the revolving console. ‘Topographical survey analysis.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Anything else, sir?’

‘No, that’s fine.’

He watched her long legs twitch past him. Watched beautiful Joan Harrington, and thought of beautiful Tina who sat in her cosy little flat back there on Earth and wondered where he’d got to. At least, he hoped she was wondering: he wouldn’t have wanted her to find a substitute for him too quickly.

SHADO ought by now to have found a way of softening the blow. Men had wives, they had girls, they had emotions. It wasn’t easy to tell a woman you’d give her a ring, or drop by next Tuesday, when you knew perfectly well that you’d be sitting on a sterile hunk of Moonrock for the next month or more, protecting her from things she didn’t even know were threatening her. All right, so it was secret and noble—it was a vocation, without drums and trumpets and banners; without recognition and without kudos and without any stirring citations. But to be ordered out of that nice warm bed and flung across the deadly wastes to this dehydrated, dehumanized, air-conditioned limbo . . .

‘Sighting,’ said Nina Barry warningly, ‘at 0135-242.’

The job was still routine. But now it was routine with a purpose; now they were no longer marking time.

‘Second sighting 0140-242. Third sighting . . .’

The girls at the consoles cleared their decks of cyclic background data. The computers were now, like the poised interceptors and like the complex warships on Earth, single-minded hunters, thinking weapons.

‘Trajectory termination?’ said Paul.

Joan Harrington was monitoring the printout from the main

coordinator. She pursed her lips, checked again, and said:

'Preliminary readings indicate Moonbase area.'

'Heading for us this time, huh?' He stabbed his index finger down at the console. 'Red alert.'

The message jangled through Moonbase. It set off a beeping, insistent alarm in SHADO headquarters. The interceptor pilots sat upright in their chairs, gauging the distance, ready to be down the chutes and airborne when the final kick came.

Light scoured across the huge lunar map which occupied so much of one wall of the control centre. It was echoed far below the Harlington-Straker studios outside London.

London was a long way away.

So was the UFO, but it was coming in fast.

It? . . . Paul Foster watched the traces separate. Aloud he said: 'Three of them. This is going to get violent.'

Joan Harrington came to his side. She had torn off a strip of printout. 'Trajectory termination 110 decimal 6, 47 decimal 9.'

He consulted the squared-up chart. It flickered mockingly.

Commander Straker's voice boomed in. 'What's going on up there?'

'ETT area 140,' reported Paul Foster, bewildered. 'Just under 60 miles from Moonbase.'

'There's nothing for them there. You're quite sure?'

Paul took a confirmatory glance at the glittering wall. He mutely consulted Joan Harrington. She shrugged her exquisite shoulders.

He said: 'That's how we're getting it. We seem to be faced with a UFO attack in force on an area of bare lava rock.'

'Go out and get 'em,' said Straker. 'Stop figuring, and launch interceptors.'

Foster pressed the clearance button, seeing in his mind's eye the lamps starting to wink their command above the delivery chutes.

'Interceptors—immediate launch.'

They were gone, heading like the enemy for a futile expanse of unyielding, uninhabited, unimportant rock.

Uneasy, he said: 'Double-check that trajectory.'

There was a brief pause, then Nina Barry from her console said: 'Coordinates unchanged. Maintaining course.'

'That's crazy.'

Out there Mark Bradley, Lew Waterman and a new recruit on his first find-and-destroy mission waited for a sighting. Their paths and

the paths of the incoming aliens converged inexorably. Was there going to be a deadly slugging match, quick victory or some incalculable defeat?

Nina said: 'Correction. They're veering off.'

'What?'

'Look. They've broken formation, they're off on a loop.'

'Where? Where are they heading?'

Joan Harrington stood behind Nina. Check and double-check. She said incredulously: 'According to the readings, back the way they came.'

The light traces of the interceptors bored steadily on across the chart. But there was nothing now to intercept. Those other spots of brightness were retreating.

'I don't get it,' said Paul. 'I don't get it at all.' He waited until there was no further doubt that the aliens had quit the area. Then he signalled the interceptors to return to base.

Then, disturbed, he made personal contact with Straker.

'Scared them off?' said Straker jubilantly.

'It'd be the first time.'

'So what happened?'

'It looks like anybody's guess, sir.'

There was a lull, then the explosion. 'Guess? With a hundred million dollars' worth of equipment at your fingertips, you still have to *guess*?'

'Sometimes,' said Paul Foster resolutely, 'Yes.'

'Look. They didn't make a billion-mile space journey for nothing.'

'No, sir.'

'And not just one of them, but three of them. They didn't come just for the ride.'

'No, sir.'

'So we need answers, Paul. What was it—what was the whole business in aid of?'

'A decoy that failed?' Paul speculated.

'Or a red herring that has already succeeded? It's your job to find out.'

Paul Foster nodded his unspoken, ironical thanks, and then gave the stand-down to green alert. It had better stay on that rating for a little while, in case the strange trio circled round and came in on another slant.

Alec Freeman said: ‘I’ve got a nasty sensation round the back of my neck.’

‘Me, too.’

‘What were they up to?’

‘I wish I knew. I simply don’t believe they could have come all that way just to train their crews, or test engines, or . . . or gloat over the scenery.’

Miss Ealand cut in. ‘It’s him again, sir.’

‘Not Blake?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘I told you to tell him—’

‘I told him, sir. And he says he knows all about that, but he’s had words with General Henderson, and with someone in the State Department, and with someone in the Ministry for Overseas Development.’

‘Overseas? . . .’

‘He’s on line six,’ said Miss Ealand, ‘if you’d like to have a word with him.’

What Miss Ealand was doing was making it clear that there came a time when even the most elusive administrator should do a bit of administrating.

Straker surrendered. He pressed the switch that would couple the line to the personal vision screen. A lean, calculatingly humorous face appeared. There were laughter lines around the mouth and eyes—practised, confident laughter, nothing spontaneous about it.

‘You’re a difficult man to contact. Commander.’

‘It’s in the nature of the job,’ said Straker flatly.

‘Four security re-routings ? And only at the fourth time of asking. Now, Commander . . . My name’s Blake.’

‘I know.’

‘I just wanted to establish contact. Nothing like a personal interchange of views, I always think. And I wanted to thank you for your help in establishing our Moon project.’

Freeman watched Straker. It was the first time the Commander had come anywhere near meeting his match.

Straker took a deep breath and said: ‘We should get one thing straight, Mr Blake. Your Moon project was authorized despite my objections. We have serious work to do up there.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of developing it as a holiday resort.’

‘If there’s any trouble—any trouble at all—I shall demand the immediate withdrawal of your employees.’

‘I quite understand, Commander. But there won’t be any trouble. No problems that I can foresee.’

‘I wish I shared your optimism.’

‘Our team will be on the Moon,’ said Blake smoothly, ‘for a period of ten days in the first instance. What can happen in that time?’

Straker said: ‘My command has a complex and hazardous duty. The presence of civilians in the area could easily jeopardize our security procedures, as well as interfere with our normal operations.’

‘Our team has been thoroughly briefed,’ said Blake blandly. ‘We don’t know what your function is up there, but the men I deal with make it clear that it’s our patriotic duty to defer to you in every possible way.’

‘In that case—’

‘In every possible way,’ said Blake, ‘consonant with our democratic right to exploit sound commercial possibilities for the good of the company and the eventual benefit of mankind.’

Freeman was glad to be out of range of the screen. He made a face, and allowed himself the luxury of a silent snort.

‘Our team,’ continued Blake, ‘will adhere to strictly limited radio frequencies and take every precaution to avoid your installations.’

‘They’ll be briefed again before they leave.’

‘As you wish. But frankly, ‘I’m sure there will be little contact with your base, unless . . .’

‘Unless what?’

‘It was agreed by my contacts that in case of an emergency you would agree—’

‘To render all possible assistance,’ Straker finished for him. ‘That’s right. Any emergency, and we give you an assisted passage right back to where you started from.’

Freeman decided that this would be a good time to leave the office. It was not that he was in tactful mood: just that he had no wish to get the full backlash of Straker’s wrath when the verbal fencing with Blake came to an end.

Anyway, there was plenty of work to do elsewhere.

Problems seemed to increase when they were not under actual attack from outer space. During a UFO assault everyone would be keyed up, nobody would be ill, nobody complained. During spells of inaction

there was a proliferation of petty troubles. The longer the peace, the more the irritation. Moonbase personnel checked spares and put in complaints about equipment. HQ men squabbled among themselves, made excuses for having more time off, and returned from rest periods tired out. The Harlington-Straker studios actually evolved new projects for more and more expensive films.

Right now there were two junior staff who wanted to resign from SHADO. One, a young mechanic, was keen to get married and lead a normal family life instead of being on emergency call at all hours of the day and night. The other was a plump blonde from the subterranean console set-up who had obviously been reasonably successful at leading a normal family life: she was expecting a baby. Not so long ago the question of resigning could not even have been raised. Once you were with SHADO, you stayed with SHADO: neither you nor your tongue could be allowed to wander. But since the perfecting of the amnesia drug, exceptions could be made. It was possible to eliminate all memories of a career in the caverns of HQ or the aseptic domes of Moonbase.

Even then, every attempt was made to discourage the operative from leaving. Training was expensive, the system was carefully calculated, wastage was frowned on. One of Freeman's more nerve-racking jobs was that of hectoring, cajoling, steering would-be deserters to stay where they were and go on fighting. Some days he found himself swinging round to their side: he wished he could shake off the hideous responsibility and go out with them into the ordinary, uncomplicated world, all recollection of SHADO expunged from his mind.

Then he would think resentfully of Straker, and hate his guts, and admit to himself that as long as Straker needed him, he'd be right here. Which just went to show what a mug he was.

He argued with the young man and appealed to his loyalty. He talked about the future of the human race, of the silent tradition of service to one's fellow human beings, and caught himself using several blushmaking lines of dialogue not only from some terrible Harlington-Straker epics but from the products of other movie makers. Then he snarled and said what the hell, if someone wanted to leave maybe he was better out of the service anyway. So the young man said he'd like to think it over.

The blonde was undoubtedly better out of the organization. Freeman fixed a memory erasure for her in Medical Centre, and went back to Straker to report.

The Commander was venting his feelings on Moonbase. 'I still want to know what those three crates were doing that close, and why they

turned back. You're to stay on green alert until I cancel it. And when I say alert, I mean it in a whole heap of ways. Two days from now you'll have a Dalotek survey team on your back doorstep. They say they're harmless, and I want them kept that way. They have permission to test for mineral deposits, to make seismic surveys and to take core samples. And that's all. If they don't play it strictly to the rules, you'll have my authority to go in there and rip their camp apart. Watch 'em. Make sure they follow agreed procedure—and let me know any time they stray out of line.'

And pray, thought Freeman, that the UFOs stay out of our hair for a couple of weeks and just for once have themselves a little vacation on Mars or Jupiter.

6

THE TRACKERS picked up a far-out blip. Paul Foster swung the revolving console to watch the girls at their controls, and waited for the range to narrow. Usually they could reckon on ten seconds before yellow alert, another ten before red.

The seconds ticked by. The trace was crawling across the screens.

Joan Harrington said: ‘Travelling too slowly for a UFO.’

Paul nodded. ‘Meteorite?’

‘Looks like it.’

Routine tracking, automatic entry in the automatic logbook, and that would be that. Another run-of-the-mill episode in a routine day in the middle of a routine week. Days ceased to have significance. Hours lapped on and on indistinguishably like the eroding ripples along a seashore.

The sea. It would be great to sprawl beside Tina on the sand by a blue ocean, offering their relaxed bodies to the sun . . . instead of wrapping his body in plastic uniform, hiding away from sun and freezing vacuum beneath a plastic dome.

Paul was not the administrative type. He liked the practical jobs, the rough ones. Maybe that was why he had been posted here, like a troublesome parish priest assigned a spell as a minor functionary for the good of his soul.

Nina Barry dropped two dockets on the console before him. He initialled them and dropped them into the recording slot. Definitely a meteorite. This one wasn’t going past: it was going to hit.

‘ETT?’ he asked.

‘Coming up, sir.’

The blip came down in a lazy, descending arc.

‘Area 017-213.’

The prediction was duly added to the record. While waiting confirmation and write-off, Paul studied the lunar map.

Suddenly he wasn’t bored any more.

‘How long to impact?’

‘Approximately three minutes.’

‘Operative Barry—you checked the Dalotek frequency yesterday?’

‘And this morning, sir,’ said Nina. ‘We said hello. They didn’t sound terribly sociable.’

‘I hope you didn’t, either.’

‘No, sir. But—’

‘But we’d better contact them now. That meteorite is aiming to come down right on top of their installation!’

Nina’s priority buzzer cut into the radio room. The urgent signal went out.

There was no reply.

‘Keep at them,’ snapped Paul.

‘Afternoon newscast link due from Earth thirty seconds, sir.’

‘Let ’em wait. Get through to Dalotek.’

Still there was no response. Paul grunted his exasperation. Meddling civilians . . . dangerous blunderers loose on the Moon, not observing correct radio procedure, probably leaving their alarm system switched off, maybe out for a happy-go-lucky stroll in the Earthlight . . .

‘Any second now, sir.’

There was no tremor within Moonbase, but the seismic recorder sketched a wild leap. Shock waves were collated and instantaneously analysed within the computer, and the reading glowed on Paul Foster’s control console.

All neat and tidy, thought Paul. Facts and figures, all accurate for the record. But what had it really been like out there, right out there in the middle of it?

‘You want to notify the Commander, sir?’

‘Try the survey base again first. Another five minutes.’

At the end of four minutes there was a response.

‘Dalotek base here.’

Paul let out a long sigh. ‘Colonel Foster here. We monitored a meteorite in your area.’

‘Saw it land,’ said a laconic voice. ‘We were out there—’

‘Wandering about on the surface?’

‘That’s what we’re here for, Colonel. It came pretty close—about two hundred yards from our installations. Approximately 1,800 pounds, we estimate.’

‘That agrees with our coordinates. You’ve checked the pressure skin of your set-up for puncture?’

‘We’ve done just that, Colonel.’ The reply was condescending, complacently amused. ‘But thank you for calling. We do appreciate it. Out.’

Paul thought of several snide remarks he could make if he re-established the connection; then thought again. He busied himself with re-scheduling Earth linkages for the day, gave clearance for incoming bulletins, and, added the new hole in the Moon to the existing pattern. Within that area it would be designated Crater 236.

An hour later he made a personal hook-up with Straker to report the incident.

Straker was in one of his moods. Sometimes he would bawl an executive out for not reporting the most insignificant little detail to him. At other times he would be wilfully obtuse and ask why he had to be bothered with every triviality they could invent. Today he was in the brush-it-off phase.

‘You mean,’ he snarled, ‘you videoed me just to tell me about a meteorite.’

‘That’s right, sir.’

‘If I had a dime for every meteorite I’ve had to duck in the last ten years—’

‘This one,’ said Paul, ‘just missed the Dalotek group.’

‘Missed? Just missed?’

‘A couple of hundred yards.’

‘Better luck next time.’ Straker thawed slightly. ‘You’re keeping an eye on them, then?’

‘A protective eye,’ said Paul sardonically.

‘Fine. So long as you give priority to protecting us rather than them.’ Light sparked across the screen from the close-cropped silver hair. Straker looked down at something in front of him, out of Paul’s viewline. ‘Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take an hourly check on that geoscanning equipment of theirs, just to make sure they’re honouring regulations. And if you find you have to send a recce team out for any . . .’ The face twisted comically sideways like something seen in a fairground mirror. ‘. . . only . . . have my . . . if it . . .’ The sound distorted, vision went crazy, Straker dissolved into a swirl of lines and spots.

‘Hold it!’ Paul commanded.

Nina Barry at her console spoke urgently to the radio room. Colour exploded on to the screen, looped and wove an insane mesh, and then faded.

‘Loss of signal, sir.’

‘Loss of . . . we *can’t* have loss of signal. Run equipment check.’

It was unheard of. Daily maintenance corrected small faults, test runs ensured that in the worst emergency there could never be utter breakdown. Yet now Earth’s link with Moonbase had been broken.

‘Switch in emergency circuits.’

A scurry of activity, then: ‘Emergency circuits not functioning, sir.’

‘What d’you mean, not functioning: the circuits out of order, or just not getting through?’

‘Correction, sir. The circuits are working perfectly well. So are the old ones. But making no contact.’

Joan Harrington said: ‘Something must be blotting us out.’

‘Get Dr Reed.’

Charles Reed was the unit’s astrophysicist, on the second month of his three-month tour of duty. He was usually a bleak, unruffled man, never bored with his uneventful routine, never apparently remembering the green hills and blue seas of Earth. But today he was worried.

‘Something’s blotting us out all right,’ he agreed, ‘but I don’t see what. Solar activity is minimal.’

‘You’re sure?’ Paul insisted. There was no other ordinary explanation for the failure: each equipment deck had been checked, power checked, procedure verified. ‘Run another test series,’ he said. ‘Solar wind has disrupted communications more than once.’

‘Not as completely as this. It would need an exceptional disturbance.’

Paul knew he was right, but could think of no other explanation. The solar wind, a steady stream of charged particles—protons or electrons—emitted by the sun could, during intense solar activity such as flare or sunspot periods, produce a dramatic increase in radio frequency radiation. Even on Earth, blanketed by its atmosphere from the most intense radiation, these eruptions could have an unsettling effect on radio transmission and reception. Out here, it was like being in the middle of a silent yet colossal thunderstorm.

‘I’d like another coronagraph check,’ he said.

‘Right, sir.’

Reed resignedly set up the computer for another check. Paul stayed at his elbow while the procedure sorted itself swiftly out.

The resulting photograph showed an almost eclipsed sun with a corona diminishing from harsh brightness into long, fine streamers

from the equatorial region. The asymmetrical effect made one thing clear: sunspot activity was minimal.

'But it's the only thing that makes sense,' Paul fretted.

'Have you considered the possibility of outside interference?'

'*What* outside interference?'

Reed shrugged. Paul, furious at his own slowness, burst out: 'That Dalotek team!'

'The frequencies open to them are, I understand, strictly limited.'

'That's what I understand, too. But suppose they don't understand or don't want to understand? If they've been breaking the agreement . . .'

'If we could have a check . . .' Reed pursed his lips, obviously thinking in abstract scientific terms, planning some little survey of his own.

Paul said: 'There's one way to check—the best.'

The Moonhopper circled the new crater like a bulky insect in search of food or shelter, and then settled down beside the man-made shelter on the dusty plain nearby.

The Dalotek installation was small, compact, and undecorative. It consisted of no more than a lightweight metal hexagon with a flat roof and no windows. Its only distinctive feature was a bristling cluster of antennae emerging from one corner. Paul Foster treated them to a mistrustful appraisal as he approached the airlock.

Inside there was little room to move. Most of the space was taken up by clumps of survey equipment and by sample boxes piled on top of one another. Furnishings were stark and simple. Everything was subordinated to the main item of equipment, a geological scanner fed by probes from the ground and from the overhead antennae.

Three people were waiting for Paul Foster. He found to his surprise that one of them was a woman; and, to his even greater surprise, that she was slim and attractive and on any mathematical assessment—and maybe on many other kinds of assessment—could well have competed with the Moonbase personnel.

'I'm Mitchell,' said the taller of the two men. 'My associate, Mac Tanner. And our geophysical analyst, Miss Carson.'

'I'm Foster. Colonel Paul Foster.'

'We thought you might be.' Mitchell looked round the congested room. 'I'm afraid we don't have any cocktails to offer, but—'

'This isn't a social call. I'm here to find out why the airwaves have gone haywire.'

The three glanced at one another. Mitchell was boss, but he left the dark-eyed Miss Carson to answer.

She said: ‘We’re operating well within the prescribed frequencies, Colonel.’

‘We shall have to make a special check on that.’

‘Go right ahead.’

‘In the meantime, I’d like all your survey equipment switched off.’

‘Switched off?’

‘Until we are positive that you’ve done that, we can’t be positive that—’

‘Colonel,’ said Tanner, ‘we’re open to inspection at anytime. But to switch off the geoscanner means a complete write-off for all the work we’ve done up to now. We’d have to be persuaded there was adequate reason for so drastic a step.’

‘More than adequate reason, Mr Tanner. We operate a key military installation up here. Our base radios lost contact with Earth an hour ago.’

The girl said: ‘Could be increased solar activity.’

‘The coronagraph shows negative.’

‘How about a simple radio fault?’ suggested Mitchell derisively. ‘Have you checked your fuses, Colonel?’

Paul did not bother to answer this one. He stood where he was and stared at the dials of the geoscanner.

‘Okay,’ said Mitchell. He nodded to Miss Carson.

She beckoned Paul closer. They stood together at the control panel. One part of his mind collected information about her—the purr of her voice, her faintly musky scent, the almost musical movement of her forearm; the other part doggedly concentrated on what she was telling him.

They went through it stage by stage, examining the frequency settings and the power output. The geoscanner was a delicate masterpiece. Once upon a time seismic surveys had had to be carried out with controlled explosions, a mass of wiring's and recorders, and crude wave producers such as dynamite. Today the electronic probes of this scanner not merely located mineral deposits and pictured their stratification but also analysed their composition. Paul had to agree that it was a beautiful thing. Beautiful—and dangerous.

‘Well, Colonel?’ Mitchell challenged him at last. ‘Have we been honouring the agreement or haven’t we?’

‘What I’ve seen,’ said Paul, ‘proves that you haven’t intentionally

operated on the restricted frequencies. But it hasn't ruled out the possibility that you used them inadvertently.'

Mitchell groaned. Tanner opened his mouth to say something that was clearly going to be offensive. Quickly Miss Carson said:

'Exactly how many radio blackouts have you had?'

'One, so far.'

'And you're sure it must be us?'

'It seemed a reasonable conclusion.'

'But now,' said Tanner, 'we've changed your mind. Right?'

'Which puts me right back where I started. That is, *if*—'

'Aw,' said Tanner in disgust. 'I have some seismic meters to attend to.' He went towards a door which could lead only to a tiny cubby-hole.

Mitchell said: 'I'll come and cue you.' He shrugged at Paul, as though to dismiss him. 'Any other questions you might have, I know Miss Carson'll be happy to set your mind at rest. See you, Colonel.'

They were not, Paul acknowledged, just being difficult. He could tell that they were as convinced of their own rightness as he was of his. Which left him, as he had complained, right back where he started.

He ventured: 'Miss Carson . . .'

'Jane. Formality seems a bit superfluous up here.'

'That made a welcome change, anyway. 'Paul,' he said.

'All right, Paul.' The friendly gesture had been a brief one. She was businesslike again. 'I have the impression you're still not a hundred per cent sure that we aren't the source of your difficulties. Mm? Yes, I can see I'm right. So if there are more radio blackouts, we get the blame.'

'Not necessarily. But I'll want to make an immediate check on your use of the scanner.'

'We're over thirty miles away. How will you do that if we lose radio contact?'

'I intend to install a landline between here and Moonbase. That way we'll always have a direct link.'

'And when something goes wrong? . . .'

'The geoscanner is the only piece of equipment you have powerful enough to disrupt communications. If there's a fadeout, and the geoscanner isn't transmitting, then you're in the clear.'

'You'll have to take our word for it that we're not operating.'

He stared at her for a long moment, then said: ‘I’m prepared to take your word.’

She smiled. It was a serious smile. ‘I know we’re not to blame,’ she said simply, earnestly.

‘We’ll begin laying that landline immediately.’

‘Fine.’ As he turned towards the airlock, Jane became a person again instead of a technician. ‘I’ll be waiting for your first call,’ she said, ‘on the hot line.’

7

THE SPLUTTER resolved itself into words. The sparking incoherence of the screen solidified into the outline of a human face.

'SHADO Control to Moonbase: do you read me?'

'Reading you,' said Nina Barry thankfully. 'Strength five, voice and vision.'

The console operators all made simultaneous screen checks. There was a faint but genuine cheer. Paul Foster saw the features sharpen on his master video and said:

'About time, too. Headquarters . . . has Commander Straker been notified?'

There was a pause, then: 'Contact notified.'

'Colonel Foster here. If the Commander would like a word—'

'The Commander has been notified, and says he's going to take a couple of hours' sleep.'

'I know exactly how he feels,' said Paul; and went and did the same.

He awoke refreshed and ready for action even though there was no intimation of any impending action. As he settled at the master console he wryly recalled his adolescent determination never to be tied to a desk job, always to be out where it was wild and free. All his work and studies and ambition had been geared to that. And here he was sitting behind a desk: a superb desk, ergonomically perfect, the ultimate in technological know-how . . . but still a desk.

He said hello to the girls and they said hello back. He checked the log, which had already been electronically checked. He ran through all the meter readings and the console couplings, ensured that dome pressure was dead accurate and that the vacuum outside was still the same dead old vacuum, and idly counted a few star clusters in a so far un-hostile corner of the cosmos.

Joan Harrington said: 'Landline installation was completed one hour five minutes ago, sir.'

'Fine.' It was on the list and he had mentally ticked it off. It wasn't until she spoke that a positive reaction was triggered off. 'Fine,' he said again. 'I'll give it a try.'

'Operative Harker did a run while you were resting, sir.'

‘I’ll try it all the same,’ he said.

Person to person, he said to himself.

When Jane Carson came on the line, she said: ‘Well, our own private exchange. I’m flattered.’

They were only testing. They could have recited numbers, the usual radio jargon, a few conventional codes. It made no odds. They were merely sounding each other out—technically speaking, of course. So what did it matter what words you used? Paul said:

‘What do you do on your evening off ? I happen to know a little Italian place, not two hundred miles south of here. How about dinner?’

‘Do they have fettuccini?’

‘Beautiful fettuccini.’

‘And a fat Italian mam does all her own cooking?’

‘You’ve *been* there! . . .’

‘I forget the way.’

‘Make a left at Crater 147. I’ll reserve a corner table.’

‘And we’ll sit and watch the stars,’ said Jane softly.

‘And our only problem will be—’

‘How the devil do we spoon the fettuccini through a quarter-inch space visor,’ she concluded ruefully.

A compulsive, rhythmic signal pulsed red on the console. Paul saw Nina Barry thumb buttons on the panel immediately in front of her and glance at him over her shoulder.

‘Sorry, Jane,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a transport coming in. Talk to you later.’

Nina Barry was waiting for him. She fed the tracking forecast through to his receiver, and he watched the steady flight-path of the lunar module on its way in.

The bright dot touched the grid intersection.

Paul said: ‘Control to module. Right on beam. Switch to computer control for landing.’

‘Roger.’

Routine again. It had happened a thousand times. Incoming freight, personnel, modification decks, fresh fruit and stale mini-books. Operatives coming back from leave, Freeman coming in on monthly inspection a dull commuter service bumbling into the terminus on the day, on the hour. There was a bigger element of doubt on the New York, Paris or London subways than here.

Needles inched round the bored faces of the dials. Paul watched without wavering but without enthusiasm.

Figures slotted into place. Himself a drab little digit with all the rest, he said: 'Landing is go.'

'Thanks, Control.'

There was something else. Something lost. Words that curled up into confusion. A mounting crackle, a slur of sound, accompanied by a haze like the Milky Way across the screens.

'Colonel!'

'I'm not receiving,' he cried. 'Do you still have them?'

Nina Barry was bent over the console. As she spun the controls, darkness and light fought it out on the screens; but to no purpose.

'I'm losing them! Radio malfunction.'

Paul said urgently into his panel mike: 'Control to module. Switch to manual. Do you read me? Module *switch to manual.'*

In the receiver was only a roar like that of some impossible beast rampaging around the spaceways.

Nina Barry tapped out an insistent message with one hand while setting the radio room alarm with another. Duty personnel switched into circuit. A mechanic rolled off his bunk and was on his way towards the power unit before Paul had finished his second desperate shout into the heavens immediately above them:

'Switch to manual! We have blackout. To manual!'

Madly he felt like racing out of Moonbase and shrieking it up into the sky.

There was no traffic showing on the screens any more; no trace, no flicker of life. But he could visualize the descent. He had made it himself, he knew the speed, knew just the moment when braking jets should be triggered off, knew to the second when the module should settle on the landing pad.

'He must have gone over to manual,' said Nina. 'Must have done, by now. If only he didn't leave it too late . . .'

There was no audible crash. Whichever way the craft had veered out of control, it had avoided Moonbase. But once again the shock recorder did a convulsive judder, shook, and steadied again before feeding its information on for analysis. Only this time it hadn't been a meteorite smashing in to form a new crater.

The impersonal, unemotional figures arrayed themselves before Paul's eyes. Joan Harrington stood beside him, mutely mouthing the bearings.

He said: ‘Right. That’s it. Get a rescue team out there.’

‘Sir.’

Joan was gone. Nina Barry, husky with unshed tears, said: ‘Shall we run the electronic failure check?’

‘Not this time.’ Paul was on his way to collect his spacesuit. ‘This time we’ll handle it properly.’

They must have picked up the signals of the Moonhopper coming. That didn’t endear them to Paul. It could mean they had apparatus working, apparatus sending out pulses equipment interfering with the delicate landing signals which a module needed to set it down accurately where it belonged.

Mitchell was as bitterly flippant as before. ‘Second visit from the military—what have we got that you haven’t got?’

‘Hi, Paul,’ said Jane.

He made himself think of the damage she had done rather than the intoxicating things she might have done in other circumstances, on another world, a long way away from here. He said:

‘There’s been a crash. You wouldn’t know about that, of course?’

Mitchell’s brittle facetiousness crumbled. ‘No,’ he said, ‘we wouldn’t. And I don’t like your manner.’

‘There’s a lot of things I don’t like about you and your whole set-up,’ said Paul. ‘Our radio blacked out again. We had a Moonship coming in. All the crew were killed.’

‘Now, wait a minute. If you’re saying we’re responsible—’

‘Was all your equipment turned off while that ship was coming in?’

‘Well . . .’

‘*Was* it?’

Jane said quietly: ‘Everything was turned off except the geoscanner, and that wasn’t transmitting.’

‘I see.’

‘I’ve told you it wasn’t transmitting. It was only collating—’

‘A ship crashed,’ said Paul. ‘Our radio link was blotted out. Nothing on Moonbase could have blown up that kind of interference. I say you’re responsible.’

‘Look, Colonel,’ said Tanner, ‘I understand how you must feel. But you’re wrong.’

‘I made the mistake of believing that last time.’

‘And now what do you intend to do?’

‘Make sure there isn’t a next time.’ Paul gave a peremptory jerk of his head. The three technicians who had lined up behind him came away from the airlock and advanced on the geoscanner. ‘I’m ending your operation.’

‘You can’t mean that,’ said Jane.

‘You don’t have the authority,’ blazed Mitchell.

‘I do mean it, and I do have the authority.’

Jane pushed herself forward as though to bar the men’s path to the scanner. ‘The project is nearly completed, The material we’ve got in those memory circuits—’

‘I’m sorry. There’s no alternative.’ He insinuated himself between Jane and the Moonbase men. ‘Remove the printed circuits.’

‘This is private property.’ Mitchell was raging, in danger of hurling himself at them. ‘Those circuits are irreplaceable.’

‘Exactly.’

Jane winced as the two front panels of the scanner were expertly unclipped and set aside. There was a quick snip of wires, and the decks were taken out. A few loose ends trailed, came away, and twisted into limp plaits.

‘Put them in the hopper,’ said Paul. ‘They go back with us.’

Mitchell and Tanner both stiffened. Jane backed away. Paul was poised, waiting for the fight. It never came. Mitchell sagged, seeing the impossibility of a brawl—or seeing, at any rate, the impossibility of a victory now.

He said: ‘You haven’t heard the last of this.’

‘Maybe,’ said Paul, ‘but we’ve heard the last of *that*.’

The men carried the guts of the geoscanner out through the airlock. Paul looked past Mitchell and Tanner at Jane. She turned her head away.

He left without another word. It seemed unlikely that he would ever see Jane Carson again. A pity, but there it was: it had never really got started, and it was being brutally finished right here and now. The Dalotek team had nothing to do now but pack up and go home.

He thought of the men killed in that lunar module crash; and felt savage and remorseless again towards that bungling, irresponsible trio who ought never to have been allowed on the Moon.

All systems were functioning normally by the time he got back to base. That in itself was surely significant. The rescue team had returned. One of them looked sick; the other two were stonily

uncommunicative. All they had to report was that the fragments salvaged from the wreck wouldn't take up a lot of space, and any official burial ceremony would be no more than a symbolic formality.

Paul reported to HQ. Commander Straker was not in Control, but the message was relayed. Two hours later he was videoing Moonbase.

'Any idea what those Dalotek goons are up to right now?'

'Tidying up, I guess,' said Paul. 'We've taken the important stuff. If they've got any sense they'll be hauling in any outside stuff we don't know about—'

'That's what worries me. If there's anything we don't know about, they could start up trouble again. One flicker, and you're to hit them hard. Seal 'em in the brig, if necessary. Blake is already raising hell with the Astrophysical Commission, but I've made it clear that I support your decision, and I'll back you in anything else you have to do. So don't hesitate.'

'I wouldn't do that,' Paul assured him. 'Not after . . . after what we've had up here.'

Straker signed off. Paul, still jittery about the two radio failures, sat dreaming of a thousand things that could go wrong, and ordered a thorough check, unit by unit; and then a double-check. All right, so it had to be that geoscanner, and now that he'd dealt with it there couldn't be another blackout—not like those two—but he was impelled to make doubly, trebly sure.

All systems perfect. Ready for routine operation, ready for any emergency, ready for any enemy.

The enemy was back next day.

Impending attack was announced by the remote, meticulously shaped syllables of the Space Intruder Detector. 'Sighting at 4028. Confirm speed zero decimal eight SOL.'

The girls focused on their screens.

Nina was first. 'I've got it!' She thumbed the data buttons. Paul Foster saw the pattern assembling on the master chart before him. He made a mental countdown . . . 'Yellow alert' . . . SID added a course confirmation, speed reduction . . . 'Red alert' . . . Nina sat back, handing over control.

'Interceptors,' ordered Paul: 'immediate launch.'

They were all keyed-up, all at top pressure. The UFO was coming in, the astronauts were sliding into the interceptors, the rocket blasts hurled them away from Moonbase.

Paul sent out a priority signal to Earth. Straker was on the video in a matter of seconds.

‘UFO sighting,’ said Paul crisply. ‘Looks like it has us in mind, but in case it overshoots—’

‘Trajectory coordinates,’ said Straker. ‘Feed them over now!’

Paul signalled to Nina. Before she could act, the screens in front of her and of Paul went hazy. Once again Straker’s face buckled, warped, and slid away into a colour-splashed infinity.

‘Blackout!’ yelled Paul. ‘Re-set!’

Joan Harrington said abruptly: ‘It’s not just Earthlink. The tracker screens are dying on us.’

‘Interceptors spaceborne,’ throbbed in the message.

‘We’ve got to get those trackers back in. Emergency check. Try SID —any contact? If we could switch over to the SID guidance circuits ‘

It was useless.

That UFO was sweeping in fast. The interceptors on their way to meet it would be flying blind now. Their paths might intersect, they might not. Any cunning change of course, and the UFO would have them at its mercy unless the astronauts could make speedy use of their on-board computers. There could be a great puff of fireworks in the sky, and then . . .

He thought suddenly of the Dalotek installation. It was below the line of fire, right across the present UFO trajectory.

‘Radio Dalotek and see what they’re up to. We can’t risk—’

‘All radio dead,’ Nina reported.

He swung off the console seat and went to the landline mike. He pressed the transmitter button; pressed it again; desperately thumbed and thumbed like a man appealing to be let into a house before some terrible curfew.

‘Where *are* they?’

‘Working outside, most likely,’ Nina suggested.

Outside. With a fair chance of the heavens falling in on them, much more cataclysmically than that meteorite had done.

He was about to turn away when there was an answering crackle, and Jane’s breathless voice:

‘Just got in. Heard you . . . What’s wrong? Don’t tell me you’ve got another radio failure?’

He got the meaning behind the challenging words, but didn’t stop to argue. ‘Both our bases are in imminent danger. Give me Mitchell.’

‘He’s out there dismantling a—’

‘Get him inside. And give me Tanner.’

Tanner came on the line, pulling no punches. ‘Look, Colonel, we were just about to call you. I don’t know what kind of booby-traps you’ve got planted all round us, but that installation in the new crater —’

‘Installation? What installation?’

‘You know better than I do. We could have walked right into it, packed down in the dust like that. I don’t know how much of that blue flame is lethal, but it didn’t look exactly harmless to me, and I’m telling you now that when I report back to head office . . .’

He ranted on. Paul was hardly listening. The interior of Moonbase was maintained at an even temperature but he felt very cold.

If there was an installation of any kind in Crater 236 it didn’t belong to SHADO.

8

THE INTERCEPTORS could have changed course and been at Crater 236 within the minute. But there was no way of getting the order through to them. That was what the whole thing was about. The reason for the visit and swift retreat of those three UFOs now became clear—now that maybe it was too late. What better way of opening a breach in Moonbase's complex defences than by dropping a pre-set jamming device? There it was now, doing its job; and out there was a UFO, preparing to come through.

A Moonhopper set off towards the crater. It was the fastest thing on the ground hereabouts but still too slow; ungainly and dangerously too slow.

Paul Foster gave curt instructions along the landline to the Dalotek team. They were to put their spacesuits and helmets on, stay inside, and keep their heads down. No, he wasn't going to tell them why.

The interceptors radio'd back to base for trajectory confirmation. They got nothing but a crackle of static. For all they knew, the UFO might be coming down like a ravening hawk on their tails.

The Moonhopper, cut off, lurched over the crags and wastelands towards the crater. It had one task, without frills and without reservations, and without any chance of its being amended or countermanded now: it had to go straight in and destroy that installation, whatever it was.

Fumbling in a kind of transmission darkness, Paul and Nina Barry worked out coordinates with the computer and a slide rule. All they could do was guess. The figures weren't going to help anybody: the men out there in the Moonhopper and in the interceptors were on their own. But they had to keep their minds occupied somehow.

If the UFO hadn't altered course, the interceptors would be in range within 60 seconds . . . 50 seconds—40 seconds.

And the Moonhopper ought, by their reckoning, to be on the crater's edge.

Which was just where it was.

The captain stared down at the eerie light pulsing up from the crater's floor. If the meteorite had not struck and carved this great hole out of the area, scattering débris widely and exposing some

things, blanketing others, the device might never have been revealed. Now it thrust up from the ground in the form of a long tube, with a blue flame-like current seething up and down it, occasionally spitting out a tongue of fire which died immediately in the vacuum.

'Range on target. Right. Fire!'

The rockets streaked down on the blue column. A spout of fire and smoke gushed up from the surface, hung against the pall of the heavens for a second, and then was quenched. A hailstorm of rock and dust pounded on the casing of the Moonhopper.

At the same time, through the drumming and thudding of this outsize shrapnel, there was an electronic crackle within the vehicle, as though the radio speaker were clearing its throat.

'Hopper, do you read me?'

'Loud and clear. Destruction of installation confirmed.'

'That's what we figured. All transmitters are operating again.'

The message went out to the interceptors. With seconds to spare, new coordinates were fed in from SID, the tracker consoles announced a one-degree shift, and the interceptors climbed steeply and swung away on a course deflection. Missile firing sequence was set up.

'Missile launch . . .'

The UFO was suspended for an eternal second like some murderous morning star above the lunar horizon, glittering in the light from the unseen sun. Then the rockets streaked towards it. The explosions were silent, the puff of blinding fire died against the celestial blackness, the scarlet haze dissolved. The arrogant new star had been snuffed out.

Reports crossed the abyss to Earth. The interceptors turned for home. The Moonhopper was already on its way, carrying a larger complement than when it had set out.

Tanner looked awestruck round the gleaming dials of the control centre.

'All this . . . I can see now why Commander Straker was so reluctant to have us up here.' He made an effort to dilute his amazement, to talk to Paul Foster man-to-man. 'I'd like to say, Colonel, that your secrets will be safe with me. Any details you care to fill in, just to put us in the picture—all safe.'

'Safer than you know,' said Paul.

Tanner didn't get the point. When he did, mused Paul to himself, it would be the point of a needle. He left Joan Harrington to organize food and allocate sleep cubicles for the Dalotek refugees—for that was

what they were, now that the wind of the explosion in Crater 236 had destroyed their hut and equipment—and went on into the leisure sphere.

Jane Carson uncurled her legs and sat up on the divan, the fronds of a carefully tended plant brushing her cheek.

Paul said: 'How do you feel?'

'Fine. Fine, now. Thanks for getting us out of there.'

'The least we could do. It was our huffing and puffing that blew your house down.'

'Yes, but I had no idea. No idea at all. Before they came to pick us up, we saw something—way up there in the sky—what kind of a battle was that? What goes on up there . . . out here?'

'Official secret.'

She nodded, but continued to search his face with her deep, questioning eyes. 'Will I be seeing you again?'

'Sure.'

'When?'

'When I get my next furlough.'

At last she lowered her eyes. She smiled to herself. 'I'm in no hurry to leave,' she said. 'And didn't I hear someone say there wouldn't be a flight back for two, maybe three days ?'

'Unfortunately,' said Paul, 'regulations up here demand a strictly working relationship between male and female operatives, of whatever rank.'

'I think you forget: I'm not one of your operatives.'

He studied her smile and the promise of her lips. Two days, he thought. Maybe three.

'Fancy me forgetting a little detail like that,' he said.

'Do you think I can persuade you not to forget me . . . afterwards?'

'I'm sure you can.'

'And you'll do your best to make sure that *I* don't forget?'

'Sure will.'

It was an absurd, skittish flirtation that they both knew was going to get serious. And to get serious fast, because there wasn't much time.

Sadly, Paul knew this even better than she did. He had good reason. There was an ironic echo to all this warm-up chat about forgetting and not forgetting. Because, whatever happened to him, Jane Carson was certainly going to forget. She, Tanner and Mitchell had all been told they would have to have injections before leaving Moonbase, to

counteract the after-effects of the violent decompression when Crater 236 went up and their installation was ripped apart. They accepted it. They'd go through the procedure as just part of the homeward flight.

And the amnesia drug would do its usual job. They would forget. No memory of Moonbase, of meteorites, of lights in the sky.

No recollection whatsoever of Paul Foster.

He sighed; tried to persuade himself it was great to know there'd be no strings, no dismal fading out of the affair later, no recriminations and no bitter aftertaste; and sighed again.

9

BILL GRANT said: ‘Twelve more hours to go. Wish you were coming with me, Colonel?’

If there was a sly reference to the fact that Jane Carson was going back on the same ship as the young astronaut, Paul chose to ignore it. He had already said his goodbyes to Jane without her being aware of it: she was already in the medical bay being programmed, he thought dourly, for forgetfulness.

‘I’ll be on the next trip,’ he said. ‘And when I get down, I’ll be there for keeps. No coming back up here at the end of furlough, like some I could mention.’

Grant produced a twisted grin. ‘But it’s better that way. I’ll have spent all my pay by then. You don’t get to throw the cash around up here.’

‘Leave some of the chicks for me, when I get there.’

‘Colonel, they’ll be so exhausted . . .’ Then, with unexpected seriousness, the astronaut said: ‘You know the thing I really miss up here?’

‘It doesn’t take much imagination to guess.’

‘No, straight. It’s . . . rain.’

‘Rain?’

‘And storm, and clouds, and sleet and slush, and the wind on your face. A nice bit of thunder every now and then.’

‘In a couple of days,’ said Paul, ‘you’re going to get awfully wet in all that rain.’

Grant lounged back and let himself be hypnotized by the monitor screen on the wall, methodically scanning the lunar surface like an unhurried lighthouse beam. Or, thought Paul in his more depressive moments, like the floodlight of a concentration camp. He’d be glad to follow young Grant on the next Earthflight; glad to relinquish command of Moonbase to Gay Ellis.

‘Man,’ murmured Grant, ‘it makes me feel dry just looking out there.’

‘Then join me in a cup of sparkling, caffeine-free coffee.’

There was a faint, nearly imperceptible plop. Paul looked sharply,

instinctively at the screen. After the events of the last week or two he was alert for any tiny warning of a communications failure, loss of contact or mechanical blur. But the screen was still placidly panning over the stony desert outside. There was a faint hiss that hadn't been there before, but it could be spasmodic background mush, the kind you got from a meteorite stream or a solar hiccup.

Grant yawned. 'If we had some ham, we could have some ham and eggs . . .'

'If we had some eggs.'

Conversation on Moonbase got like that if you stayed here long enough.

This time tomorrow young Grant would be breathing real air, full of injurious particles and the perfume of passing women.

Paul found he was responding to the astronaut's uncontrollable yawn. He let himself sag back in his chair and pretended he was marching into the best restaurant in London's new International Centre with Jane Carson on his arm . . . No. Jane would have had all recollection of him wiped from her mind. All right, so he could start again. Or there was Tina. Tina, who had stayed faithful—he hoped. Tina, who . . .

The panorama of the grey desert was starting on its fifth rotation in fifteen minutes. Beside it, a sour orange light began to glow, intensifying until it was a painful scream of brightness.

'Hey!' Paul shoved himself up and out of the chair. 'Pressure leak.'

There was a crack behind him as he went towards the door. Air sucked at him. He gripped the jamb of the door and held on, while the magazines and microsheets and ash from the ashtray swirled up into a whirlwind and then began to race for the observation port.

Paul steadied himself, fought for breath, and managed to look back.

It was like being on the rim of a tornado. Air was being drawn in a mad flurry towards a gaping crack in the thick transparent panel. Everything that could be shifted by the wind was being shifted, kicked about, hurled at the jagged hole.

Crazy. They had been staring at the screen, not at the view itself—because it was a limited view from the observation port, and you got to rely on the tracking screen rather than on your own eyesight.

Bill Grant was rammed against the wall near the opening. He pushed himself away, attempting to reach Paul, and was snatched back by the gale.

Paul felt the door behind him flip open, and heard the whine of the emergency airlock beginning to operate. He edged back into the

narrow space, into the safety zone, while breath was dragged out from between his lips and nothing came back in to replace it.

'Bill!' It was a shout, plucked away and hurled contemptuously in with the rubbish storm that for a few seconds blocked the rent in the window.

Bill Grant went down to his hands and knees and tried to crawl towards the exit. For a moment Paul thought it was going to be all right: the junk plastered to the observation panel was covering the gap and might hold.

There was a click, and the door began to close. He leaned against it, holding it open until Bill could make it into the airlock. But it pushed steadily, forcing him against the jamb. It would go on pushing until he was a squashed, bloody pulp.

He braced himself and tried to shout again, as though one last shout might do some incredible good.

Bill was face down on the floor. He groped forward with one clawing, weakening hand. There was hardly any air left in the room. With a diabolic shriek the wad of fragments jammed in the window was sucked out into the lunar emptiness. Bill raised his head, his eyes staring. He choked soundlessly, tried to get a grip on the smooth flooring, tried to wipe a shred of paper from his eye; and then let his face smack down and stay down.

Paul felt the door cutting into his shoulder. He writhed despairingly away, and the door closed and sealed him into the suffocating prison of the airlock.

Pressure adjusted. The inner door slid open.

Somewhere an alarm was clamouring insistently. Joan Harrington and Mark Bradley came racing along the corridor.

'What happened?'

'You all right, Colonel?'

The alarm stopped. There was no air left now in the leisure sphere beyond that door, and pressure on this side had resumed standard level after temporarily feeding the airlock.

Mark said: 'Colonel, was there anyone with you?'

'Astronaut Grant.'

Bill Grant and Mark Bradley had worked together since Mark reported back to Moonbase after his psychological interrogation. Bill had replaced the astronaut who had died, and had been a good replacement; and now was a dead astronaut himself. Mark stared in shuddering disbelief at the implacable door. Harshly he said: 'Bill . . . he's in there?'

‘In there,’ said Paul.

The observation panel was replaced. Air was pumped in, the gauges checked, the fitting of the observation port tested up to three times normal pressure. It was airtight. The inner doors opened again, and a sheet was laid over the contorted face of Bill Grant.

Two of the girls started clearing up the mess inside the windswept room. Six men, duty personnel and supposedly off-duty personnel, went out and combed every foot of the ground outside the leisure area. Every fragment, every sliver was collected and brought back inside. Paul Foster wanted the viewport literally rebuilt. He wanted the dimensions of the crack analysed, wanted to know what had gone through it and how, wanted to know if there was an intrinsic defect, wanted to know if a meteorite storm had flung off some infinitesimal scraps of inconceivably destructive material—wanted to *know*.

A rocket was sent off into space. A pathetically small rocket, not as substantial as a Moonship, not guided like an interceptor or a UFO-hunting missile. Just a container for the shell of Astronaut William Grant, killed in the line of duty on April 12th, 1981. It needed no guidance, no orbit calculations. It went straight out for as long as its fuel would last, and then would drift until caught in the gravitational field of some planet or asteroid. William Grant, committed to the deep of space, wouldn’t care.

Shortly after the ceremony, another lift-off took place. Paul Foster had been recalled to SHADO headquarters four days before his furlough ship was due.

In disgrace? For having overlooked something he couldn’t possibly have anticipated . . . for having been on the spot when a good SHADO man had the life literally sucked out of him?

He went back to Earth grimly equipped with evidence.

Straker and Freeman were waiting for him in the underground office. He had told them all the facts over the video. Now they wanted them all over again, as though only by touching and weighing it in the palms of their hands could they even begin to believe it.

‘Here.’ Paul dropped a small, distorted piece of metal on the desk. ‘From the angle of entry we’ve calculated the projectile was fired from a group of rocks about two hundred metres from the base. And this is what did it. The impact velocity must have been fantastic.’ As Straker turned the projectile over and over in his fingers as though to divine its innermost secrets, Paul added: ‘The chemical analysis hasn’t told us much . . . except that it’s extra-terrestrial.’

‘Meaning that an alien made an attempt to shatter the skin of

Moonbase?'

'Meaning that one succeeded,' said Freeman.

'But why?'

'Add that to a couple of thousand queries we already have in the catalogues.'

Paul said: 'One of the constituents of that alloy is unknown on Earth. The ballistics boys say its behaviour on impact is consonant with no known bullet. It was an alien, all right.'

Straker's mouth tugged down accusingly. 'You're saying a UFO landed undetected on the Moon and one of the occupants was able to get out and get close enough to our base to shoot this through a viewport?'

Paul had given this one plenty of thought before he ever got down into HQ. He said: 'We've only just got out of that storm of interference —planted by our friends from out there. They got in and set up their jamming device. They came in on an attack, and we only just stopped them in time. Stopped *one* of them. Who's to say there wasn't another? There were three in that first . . . um . . . minelaying operation, if you like to call it that. Don't tell me they all went all the way back to their own planet, wherever it may be. One came in for a kill. Another one could have sneaked through during our radio and tracker blackout.'

'And it's still on the Moon?' said Freeman.

'Could be.'

'It could have lifted off and got clear,' said Straker, 'while you were coping with all that trouble.'

'No. We were operational again in too short a time. The trackers would have picked it up. It's still there somewhere. Wrecked, maybe. Only one survivor, maybe using up his ammunition out of sheer vindictiveness.'

'Or still fully active,' said Straker icily.

'I've had the interceptors out there, since it happened, cross-hatching every square mile.'

'And if they find it?'

'When they find it,' said Paul, 'my orders are to destroy.'

Straker considered this. He rubbed his chin. He had a smooth, boyish complexion; but his eyes were old, his mouth grim and disillusioned. He was not exactly looking for trouble: just assuming that there was a lot of it around some place.

'When's the next possible lunar launch?' he asked at last.

Freeman flicked the intercom switch and repeated the query. The

answer was prompt. ‘Can do 14.00 hours tomorrow.’

‘Right,’ said Straker. ‘Alec, you’ll assume command here. I’m off to Moonbase. And get me all the information we have on the disintegration of UFOs in the Earth’s atmosphere—spontaneous or otherwise.’ As Freeman turned again towards the intercom, the Commander spun towards Paul and went on: ‘I want you to countermand your orders to the interceptors. Tell them to seek and observe. Not destroy. OK?’

Paul didn’t like it. Paul thought of Bill Grant, young and keen and good fun, who would now never see those girls on whom he had been so ready to spend his hard-earned money; and he didn’t like the notion of any soft-pedaling.

Straker read his mind as though there had been a printout off his tongue. ‘All right, I know. I know. The natural reaction is to want to hit back. I remember young Grant. I liked him. But we’ve got other responsibilities. I want to know about the UFOs. We’ve discovered that a UFO disintegrates if it stays too long on Earth, just as the aliens age and give up the ghost when they’re exposed to our atmosphere. All the evidence points to our atmosphere as being the killer so far as they’re concerned—the creatures and their machines both.’

Paul got it. ‘There’s no atmosphere on the Moon.’

‘Right. It could be our best ever chance to get our hands on a UFO . . . intact.’

‘I’ll be right with you, sir.’

Straker hesitated, then said: ‘No. Not quite. You’re due for reassignment. Lieutenant Ellis is ready to take over again. I’ll go back with her and leave you to work things out with Colonel Freeman.’

‘But I’m in this up to the neck. I’m—’

‘I’ve been in it up to the neck,’ said Straker glacially, ‘for longer than I care to think. And I make the rules. Right?’

‘Yessir. But . . . if you think I neglected my duty . . . if this means that you want to push me quietly off to one side . . .’

Straker said: ‘Colonel Foster . . . Paul . . . Any time I consider anyone in this outfit has neglected his duty, either he gets a slug in the back of the neck or we treat him to a dose of amnesia and recommend him for an early pension. It’s simple economy: Lieutenant Ellis is due back anyway at the end of the week, you’re due for a short furlough and then for re-posting. I don’t want Moonflights treated like day excursions, to and fro—they cost money. You read me?’

‘Loud and clear, sir,’ said Paul resignedly.

‘Then go get yourself a holiday. Leave an address where Colonel

Freeman can contact you when he needs to . . . and relax.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Paul without a flicker of gratitude.

He felt demoted, demoralized. Which was crazy. It seemed only a few hours ago that he was sitting with Bill Grant yearning to be back on Earth, living it up. Now he wanted only to be back on the Moon, grappling with the lousy killers who had wiped out Bill Grant.

Maybe that was it. His feelings had been too obvious. Straker was shoving him in the freezer to cool off and going back with Gay Ellis to organize the thing his own methodical, even more frozen way.

Alec Freeman was somewhere else in the building. Paul went to Miss Ealand to leave his address so that it could be passed on.

And then wondered what address to give.

He didn't fancy sprawling around in his own flat. No better than the dehumanized, dehydrated, devitalized cubicle on Moonbase. But he hadn't let Tina know he would be back, and in any case didn't see why he should hand out that address to all and sundry. Tonight he might go anywhere.

If they wanted him tonight, they could whistle for him. He gave the address of the flat, which Miss Ealand assured him she already had in personnel records, and went out on the town.

It wasn't quite the gay, effervescent town he had pictured when lying on his lonely bunk. It was dirtier and scruffier than he had remembered. Nobody looked especially happy. The sky-signs were more garish than ever, the noise worse than ever. He felt a moment of out-and-out panic—he, Colonel Paul Foster, big man of action, protector of Earth and the Earthlings, he was scared stiff. Noise, people, bright lights, a surf of hysteria breaking all over him.

He scuttled into what looked like a discreet, plushy restaurant.

The clamour was dulled. There was soft, meaningless music coming from nowhere, and the faint swish of feet across the deep carpeting. The *maître d'hôtel* was on the far side of the gilded room, half turning, showing by a deferential yet self-assured twitch of the eyebrows that he would be over in a minute.

Paul looked at the tables. Most of them were occupied by couples, quartets, mixtures of male and female, people laughing, people looking bored, people eating—not the neat pills of wholesome concentrates which made up a Moonbase meal, but hunks of meat and real potatoes and green peas which, even if frozen, had at any rate preserved the basic appearance of peas.

Paul found that the sight nauseated him slightly.

He took an uncertain step between two tables, and a girl at one side looked up incuriously at him. The sight of her was far from nauseating. He felt a spark of delight, and was glad to let it burn. Things could work out after all.

She was on her own, though the place opposite her was laid and there was a folded napkin dropped across it.

He put the tips of his fingers on the table and said: 'Miss Carson, I don't suppose you remember me.'

Jane Carson looked up, pleasantly sceptical. 'No,' she said coolly. 'Should I?'

'It was only a . . . brief encounter. Maybe we could make the next one a bit longer.'

'I really can't imagine why.'

'If maybe you're free—'

'No. I'm not.'

'Not tonight, maybe, but—'

'Or any other night.'

Jane looked past him. A young man with broad shoulders came back to the other chair. He looked from Jane to Paul, waiting to be introduced.

Broad shoulders or not, Paul could have coped with him. But what was the use? Jane didn't want to know. Given time, he could have concentrated, could have pursued her, could have made her feel the way about him she had felt such a short time ago.

Given time . . .

He shrugged, smiled, said 'Nice seeing you again', and left. There was always Tina.

Even about that he began to have doubts when, after the third mellow chime on her doorbell, she still did not open the door. He was about to turn away when there was the click of the catch and she was framed against the background he remembered so well—that psychostyle painting he had bought her, the stereo set-up against the wall, the soft hues and cushioned comfort. The delay was explained. She clutched a shower robe about her, and exuded a warm, scented glow.

'Paul! I didn't expect you!'

'Hope you weren't expecting anyone else?'

She put out an arm to catch his head and draw it towards her so that they could kiss; and the robe slipped from one gleaming shoulder.

'Why didn't you call? I look such a mess.'

Paul didn't think she looked a mess. He wondered how he could have spent even a few seconds—tawdry, wasted seconds—on trying to renew things with Jane Carson.

He said: 'Tina. Gorgeous Tina.' Her cheek was damp against his. 'When you've finished the wash-and-paint job, we'll go out and eat.'

'We'll do no such thing,' she murmured.

They did no such thing.

Later, much later, when they were content and relaxed and hadn't said a word for a long time, because there was no need for words, she stirred in his arms and he knew she could not help the resentful query. Whichever way she phrased it, however roundabout she might make it, the resentment would always inevitably be there.

'I suppose you'll be off again in the morning?'

'Not this time.'

'No? I don't believe it.'

'I'm on holiday,' he said. 'And after that, there'll be a nice office job near London, I think.'

'You think. Um.' She was trying to sound cynical, but even the hope of it being true brought a tinge of happiness into her voice. 'The sort of thing you'll be doing now—nice cosy administrative stuff—sort of promotion? . . .'

'No questions,' he said firmly. 'You know I can't tell you.'

'I don't see why.'

Before it could get acrimonious, he kissed her again, and made everything all right, and could sense her beginning to believe that this time, incredibly, it really was going to stay all right. It was infectious. He lay awake in the darkness and thought that maybe he had grown out of his longing for violent action: a routine job in HQ wouldn't be so awful, regular hours would have their compensations if some of the regular hours included Tina.

He drifted into sleep without being aware of it, and was woken in broad daylight by the jangle of a telephone.

Tina groped for it and said: 'Yes. Well, yes . . . yes, he is.' She handed the phone to Paul, and whispered angrily: 'Who knows you're here?'

'Paul?' It was Alec Freeman.

'How did you know—'

'Security. We know everything. I'd have thought you realized that by now. Sorry, boy, but you'd better get out of the sack and get moving.'

‘I’m on leave. I—’

‘Gay Ellis has a cold.’

‘What?’

‘A cold. Lieutenant Ellis is unfit to return to Moonbase, so you will have to accompany the Commander.’

Paul felt like tearing the phone cord away from the wall. A cold! We could send ships to the Moon, track and destroy UFOs, prepare food from pulp and sawdust and accurately count the stars in the firmament; but nobody could yet find a cure for the common cold. Nobody carrying a virus of that kind could be allowed in the constricted atmosphere of Moonbase.

‘Blast-off at 14.00 hours,’ Freeman was reminding him. ‘Better report here by noon at the latest. At the latest—right?’

‘Right,’ said Paul wearily.

He hung up.

Tina said: ‘And what was all that about, as if I didn’t know?’

‘I’m afraid—’

‘You’re afraid you have to pack your bags and be off again.’

‘Not for long,’ he said. ‘Not this time.’

‘Not this time,’ she echoed scornfully. ‘But what about the next time, and the time after that? And that man on the phone—how did he know you were here: what do you tell people about me, what’s it all about, what—’

‘I’d no idea they knew.’

‘I don’t like it.’ She was in tears. ‘I just don’t like it.’

Paul didn’t like it either. He didn’t like it one little bit. But already, automatically, his mind was starting to readjust to the demands of Moonbase and the problems that were waiting for him there.

10

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS taken in Paul's absence were spread out on a table in the repaired leisure sphere. While Straker pored over them, Paul could not restrain himself from glancing once round the room, seeing yet again the whirlwind that had threatened to tear it apart; and still seeing Bill Grant's contorted face.

'This?' Straker's forefinger was jabbing at one picture. 'This what you mean?'

'That's it, sir, We think that could be it.'

Paul leaned closer to the Commander. The dot to left of centre of the picture did look sharper than the surrounding Moonscape. But it could be a structural fault of some kind.

He said: 'It's been compared with the standard satellite survey from last year?'

'Yes, Colonel.'

'And it doesn't appear on that?'

'It does not.'

They studied the blob again.

Straker said: 'How long would it take a Moonmobile to reach the area?'

'About four hours,' said Paul. 'It's just below the terminator.'

'Right. Set it up.'

'I think we ought to use two hoppers, with a couple of men in each.'

Mark said: 'I'd like to handle one, sir.'

'Fine. You know the area. Choose your own navigator.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'That leaves the other hopper,' said Straker.

'I'll pick my own crewman, too,' said Paul. 'We'll need a missile operative.'

Straker sat back from the photographs. 'As Moonbase commander, Colonel, your place will be in the control sphere.'

'Sir. I'm the guy who saw Bill Grant's face as he tried to make it to the airlock. This is a personal debt. I'd like to settle it.'

Straker's face was an authoritarian mask. But when he spoke he was mild and matter-of-fact. 'I imagine I can do a stint at the console, just to keep my ageing hand in.'

The two mobiles were fuelled, the missiles loaded, firing timers checked. Radio links were tested, mobile to mobile and mobiles to Moonbase receiver. Straker was tense: whenever Straker wanted something, he wanted it badly. Responsibility gnawed at him. Paul, in spite of his urge to go out and avenge Bill Grant, was at ease now. Action lay ahead.

They set out towards the dot that might or might not be an alien ship; that might provide a lot of answers, or might simply blow up in their faces.

At first they were bathed in brightness but it faded fast as they crossed the terminator. Now the two hoppers were in lunar night, their headlights silvering the ridges and hummocks ahead.

Paul spoke to Mark Bradley. 'Just under two miles from target.'

Before Mark could make any reply, Straker's voice broke in. 'Listen, you two. At the first sign of trouble, get the hell out of there, and I'll send the interceptors in. Understood?'

'Understood,' said the two men together.

To himself, Paul added: *Sure, sure; but we won't need them.*

Two minutes went by. Another thirty seconds, and they would be close to the top of a splintered ridge immediately across their path. From there the object should be visible.

To Mark he said: 'We'll leave the mobiles at the foot of that slope and go in on foot. Park yours in the cleft way over on your offside. And then start walking—but don't get ahead of me.'

'Roger.'

Paul tucked a directional rifle under his arm and lowered himself to the surface. On Earth the rifle would have been cumbersome, but in this light gravity it was easily manageable. Its telescopic barrel incorporated a radiation counter. Its slugs were tidily compressed murder.

The line of the ridge was as ragged as torn paper. Paul eased himself up to the summit and peered between two minor crags.

He was peering down into a small crater, memorial to some meteorite fragment of long ago. Lunar dust had settled on many of the tumbled rocks, blurring their edges. A haze of Earthlight made it even more difficult to pick out details.

Then he saw it.

The landing must have been a bad one. The UFO lay tilted to one side against a sprawling cairn of boulders. There was no sign of movement. No light came from inside. The smooth, rounded shape looked out of place in this dead landscape: a man-made tin can thrown aside in a grey desert.

Only it wasn't man-made. It was alien—alien to the moon, alien to mankind.

Paul brought the rifle slowly up, sighted it on the faintly gleaming side of the vessel, and thumbed the radiation counter. There was no responsive ticking; no registration at all.

He thought of the creature which had waited outside Moonbase, perhaps with just such a weapon pressed to its shoulder—the creature which had fired and punctured the observation port, to snuff out Bill Grant's life. He settled himself into a new position, braced against a rocky outcrop, and let his finger raised by the trigger descend slowly against it, anticipating the recoil, the smack of the fiery slug through the skin of the UFO.

Straker wouldn't be pleased.

He lay there for a few seconds, then eased himself down from the ridge. Mark Bradley was fidgeting at the foot of the slope, just as eager for action as Paul himself.

Paul said: 'It's there all right.'

'Any sign of life?'

'None.' He moved the waveband control on his suit radio and said: 'Control.'

'Any luck?' said Straker.

'Have positive sighting of UFO.'

'Position?'

'The aerial shots were right. It's sitting there in the middle of that crater. Sitting just where it was days ago, when the pictures were taken. Could have been damaged on landing.'

'Could have been abandoned?'

'There's only one way to find out,' said Paul.

'Now take it easy. If it gets bad—'

'We'll holler,' Paul promised. He switched back to Mark Bradley. 'We'll start to move in'—he turned his wrist to show the dial of his watch—'in two minutes.'

'Right.'

Back at Moonbase, Paul knew, Straker would be jittering inside without allowing one muscle of his face to show it.

The two crewmen came out of the mobiles to make a foursome, just for those two preparatory minutes. They checked air supplies in the cylinders strapped to their shoulders. Mark gave a thumbs-up sign. Time check, weapon check, radio check . . .

Paul said: 'Let's go, then. There's a rock ten yards over this ridge. Wait till the guy ahead of you reaches it before you come over the top.'

'Who's first in line?' asked Mark.

'My privilege.'

'I'll follow you. My pleasure.'

'Right. Then you two—Don, Brad. Any questions?'

'We could run into an alien out on the surface.'

'Could do. But remember our objective this time is the UFO. The aliens are expendable. That ship is important. The Commander has his heart set on it.'

'His heart?' said Mark. 'Now, that's what I *really* call an alien concept!'

'Move,' said Paul.

He clambered back up the incline and cautiously raised his head above the ridge. The crater looked just the same, just as dead.

Paul glanced back. He could see the shadowy forms of the others pressed against the slope. Inside his helmet, sweat formed on his brow. Going over the top might be easy and uneventful. If it wasn't, he might never be given the time to guess what hit him.

He studied the UFO. Was it really and truly just a wreck, waiting harmlessly to be salvaged?

Ready for the descent into the crater, he waved back to Mark to move up. The others edged into new positions. Then he went over, and slithered down the inner lip of the crater. Ten yards on, and he was beside the hump of rock which he had spotted on that first inspection. He looked back. Mark's head was a helmeted dome against the sky. Paul waved him to come on down, and moved out from the rock.

The UFO seemed suddenly to brighten, as though the Earthlight shining on it had intensified. But the light came from within the ship. The whole fabric pulsed with radiance as though some slow cosmic breath were puffing on a rekindled ember.

'Hold it!' cried Paul.

A shaft of light seared past him and seared the rim of the crater.

Paul flung himself back towards the rock and fell prone as rubble showered around his head. A miniature avalanche seethed down from the ridge.

When it had settled, he lay still. Softly, as though afraid of bringing another lightning bolt on them from the UFO, he said: 'You all right, Mark?'

There was no answer.

Paul tried again, louder. Then he tried the others. Still not a murmur. He switched wavebands and tried to contact Moonbase. Nothing. His set must have been damaged when he crashed to the ground. Lucky it wasn't anything worse—a punctured suit, a fractured air cylinder.

He kept the rocks between himself and the UFO, and crawled towards the slope. There was a thin mist of dust particles which might help to spoil the aliens' aim if they saw him. But it was settling quickly. He writhed on, took a deep breath, and then scrabbled like a madman up the inside of the crater.

Flame lashed along the ridge. There were two massive explosions of rock, and while the fragments were still leaping into the air like the vomit of a volcano, Paul went over on to the other side. He came to a jarring halt, and for a panic-stricken moment was tempted to fight off the hands that gripped his arms and lifted him to his feet. Then Mark Bradley and Don Waterman steadied him.

Mark's lips were moving but no sound came through. Paul mimed that he couldn't hear a thing. Mark dipped his head and brought his helmet against Paul's, so that the vibrations buzzed faintly but clearly across.

'You OK?'

'Air seems all right. Radio malfunction. Let's get back to the hoppers.'

A parabola of flame curved over the ridge, scouring a briefly fiery channel out of the ground behind them.

Mark said: 'When we didn't hear from you, I reported to Straker. Told him the UFO had opened fire. He's launching interceptors, ready to shoot it up when he knows we're away.'

There was another gout of fire and débris. Paul assessed the distance back to the hidden Moonmobiles.

He said: 'I'll go and get one of the hoppers.'

'Colonel, if anyone goes—'

'I give the orders here. Stay where you are, keep your head down, and be ready to get in when I arrive.'

There was a lull. He walked out across the rutted plain. The aliens couldn't see him. They were only taking a blind stab at range and elevation. There was at best a thousand to one chance—why not be comfortable and make it ten thousand to one—of them hitting him. Unless, of course, they had some incredibly sensitive detectors which could separate grains of sand and pinpoint the speck of a man on a vast tract of desert.

And what happened if the UFO lifted off and sighted him?

It was a chance he had to take.

Paul broke into a slow trot, not daring to go too fast: the rubble underfoot wasn't reliable enough for a frenzied sprint.

It would be four minutes before the interceptors came in over the skyline. In two minutes he could have one of the mobiles back to lift the team out of the danger zone.

Lurid beams tore more strips from the crater rim and hurled them in every direction. Something ripped past Paul's left foot. Splinters ricocheted from rocky hummocks. He went down on his knees beside a jagged formation like an Easter Island statue, and waited for the shower to abate.

He counted up to ten before getting to his feet again. The hoppers were only a hundred yards away now. The snout and retracted forelegs of his own machine jutted out from the overhang where it had been parked.

Paul ran.

He ran ten yards, and then his foot plunged into a crack in the ground. There was a wrench that shuddered up Paul's leg and through his whole body. He heard the squeal of his own voice inside the helmet, and put out his hands to save himself. Pain lanced through him again as he fell, twisted to one side. He tried to tug his foot free, and nearly fainted with the agony of it.

'Pull out,' he sobbed. 'Pull back to the mobiles.'

But Mark couldn't hear him. Nobody could hear him. He had to get to the hopper; had to drag himself there somehow and get it moving.

He carefully extricated his bent foot, forcing himself to take his time. When it was out, sweat was streaming down his face. He tried putting his weight on the foot, and went down on his knees again. All right: so it was literally going to be a drag.

An unexpected, irrational flicker of light slid across the iron-dull rocks ahead. Paul slewed round, staring awkwardly upwards over his shoulder.

The UFO had lifted off. As he watched, it rose spinning and glowing

over the edge of the crater. It appeared to be tilted over on one side, but from this angle it was impossible to be sure.

At the same time three interceptors came over the skyline in tight formation.

Paul tried to cheer but could produce only a hoarse croak. He let himself subside, leaning forward to nurse his twisted ankle but continuing to follow the progress of the slowly rising UFO and the converging hunters.

Somewhere instructions would be flying to and fro, coordinates would be finalized, Straker would be giving the order. He *had* to. He wasn't going to hold off and let the thing get away, was he?

'Get it!' Paul panted. 'Go on—hit it!'

The nose of the leading interceptor spewed a thin jet of flame. It died, and then came to life again in the form of a billowing cloud of fire. For an instant the UFO was apparently enveloped in it.

The interceptors raced on. Below them, the alien craft emerged from the dazzle, toppling out of control. It was racing down towards Paul, growing more enormous by the second.

He cowered down. The great shadow skimmed above his head. He pushed himself up again to watch its end.

And the world dissolved into an explosive fury, a last apocalyptic nightmare of flame and fragments as the UFO smashed into the Moonmobile and disintegrated.

11

ROUTINE NOTIFICATION of a UFO destruction came through to SHADO underground HQ. And that was all. Alec Freeman had been fretting at the lack of news. Now, seeing the bare facts barely recorded, he fretted even more. If Straker himself had been on duty down here, that blank statement wouldn't have been accepted: the Commander would have wanted every little detail filled in for his personal satisfaction. Just because he was up there, throwing his weight about —and even at lunar gravity Straker was one to make his weight felt— he thought there was no need to feed Earth all the relevant information.

Freeman settled himself in the office and demanded video contact with the Commander.

The Commander, he was told, was in the leisure sphere in charge of a debriefing session.

'While I wait,' said Freeman, 'maybe you could fill me in on a few little items. A little digest of just what the hell is going on up there, right?'

Joan Harrington's face turned unhappily across the screen as though she couldn't bear to look at him.

'I thought we'd notified you, sir. UFO destroyed.'

'So we didn't get to look around the interior decor?'

'No, sir.'

'Why did it have to be destroyed? It turned nasty?'

'It attempted to escape, but was intercepted.'

'And that's all?'

Joan Harrington did not reply.

Freeman said: 'Look, I'm asking you—is that all? Did something go wrong?'

'I think you'd better wait until the Commander wants to speak to you. Colonel.'

'Tell him I'm waiting,' said Freeman. 'I'll be sitting here until he comes through.'

Fifteen minutes later the screen was filled with Straker's hard, unyielding features.

Freeman said: 'I just wanted to know—'

'All right, Alec; all right. There weren't many frills on the information we sent. I wasn't going to make any additions until I was sure in my own mind that they belonged. Now I'm sure. And I wish I didn't have to be.'

'There was some kind of a slip-up?'

'Some kind of a blow-up,' said Straker. 'We've lost Paul Foster.'

'Lost him?'

'Blown to bits,' said Straker. 'Him and his Moonmobile and the UFO —all at one go.'

Freeman felt sick. They had lost men before, in a lot of unpleasant ways. But none of them of Paul Foster's calibre. There had been some moments in his training when they had doubted whether he was quite the right material—too erratic, too violent, too impatient—but the man's true mettle had shown through, and he had proved himself over and over again. Once they had nearly lost him through a gruesome mistake in judgement. Now they had really lost him, man dust to Moondust.

He said: 'You're sure? There's no chance—no chance at all—of any mistake? Of any . . . any . . .' He floundered. It was like trying to get your breath back after you'd been kicked in the guts

'He'd left the others near the crater while he went back to get a mobile, and—'

'Why hadn't he detailed someone else to do that?'

'If he was still alive,' said Straker grimly, 'I'd be asking him just that question. He'd got a very personal thing about this business. He knows it wasn't possible for him to have saved Grant, but he felt there ought to have been some way: that's how I figure it, anyway. He had to be in it up to his neck, doing the whole damned operation himself.'

'And while he was doing it—'

'The UFO took off, our interceptors went in. We had no radio contact with Foster. Mark Bradley told us about the lift-off, told us he thought Foster must be clear away to the Moonmobile in that time. I gave orders to fire. I had to do it, Alec.'

'Sure, sure. And Paul was underneath?'

'Him and the hopper. The UFO ploughed right into them. Carved itself a nice new crater. The other mobile was so badly damaged it's a miracle it ever made it back to base.'

'Rescue party?'

'If I thought there was one chance in ten million . . .' Straker's lips

drew tight, as Alec had often seen them do when the Commander was forcing himself to snap off one thread of thought and taking up another. 'I'm staying up here for a couple of days. Until Lieutenant Ellis gets a clean bill of health, this place will have to have a new commander. I've got some decisions to make. And, Alec . . . there's something I want you to do. For Paul Foster. And for . . . whoever she may be.' He paused. 'You know who she is?'

'Yep. I know who she is.' Freeman made it sound curt and offhanded because his stomach had just turned over. He knew what Straker was going to tell him to do, and he didn't want to do it.

'I never asked him any questions. She was on the record, you never suggested we should worry about her as a Security risk. I don't want to know anything about her now. But I want her told—and I leave it to you how you do it.'

'Mighty kind of you,' said Freeman. 'You don't think it'd be appropriate for you to come down from there and tell her yourself?'

'No, I do not. Sorry, Alec, but it's all yours.'

Freeman helped himself to a drink while he debated whether to phone or to call personally on Tina Waring. On the phone he could be brusque and non-committal; could tell her the worst, offer condolences, and ring off when he wanted to end the conversation. Face to face it would be a lot more painful.

He tried to imagine what it would be like to sit at the end of a line and hear an impersonal message reporting a death, followed by the usual click and burr and the meaningless whisper of other, far-off voices. He found he could imagine it all too well.

Freeman had always been a fast driver. Today he exceeded every limit on his way to Parkcrest Court, in a hurry to get the whole lousy business over and done with.

The moment Tina opened the door it became easy to understand why Paul Foster had come back again and again to this flat. She had that shimmering quality, that indefinable radiance just below the skin, which makes a few women in every few hundred thousand just twice as vital and twice as beautiful as all the others. In any other circumstances Freeman would have started to talk confidently, winningly, brashly and walked into the room and into her life, laughing. As it was, he tried to establish the right warning note; his voice low, his eyes grave.

'Miss Waring?'

For a split second she had been ready to smile, prompted by the

hope that it was Paul at the door, inexplicably home. The smile faded.

'Yes,' she said questioningly.

'My name's Alec Freeman. I'm a friend of Paul Foster's. May I come in?'

She stood back apprehensively. He went into the flat. It was furnished with taste and a good eye for the practical. Style and comfort, he thought in an abstracted mood that was a defence against what he sooner or later had to say. All that was lacking was the man Tina wanted to share it with.

He said: 'I . . .' Then he gulped and asked: 'Have you got a drink?'

She stared. 'Scotch?'

'That'll be fine. Fine.'

It was only putting off the evil moment. He watched the sway of her hips as she moved to the drinks cupboard. She poured a generous double, hesitated, then splashed some more in and turned to hand him the glass.

He shook his head. 'No. It's for you.'

'I don't understand. You say you're a friend of—'

'I didn't get it quite right. I *was* a friend,'

'Please . . .'

'I think you'd better sit down.'

She was going to argue, and then somehow it hit her. Slowly she let herself sink on to the couch, clutching the glass but not drinking.

'What's happened?'

He steeled himself to say it. 'There's been . . . an accident.'

'What kind of accident? How bad is it?'

'It must have been instantaneous,' said Freeman. 'I'm sorry.'

She was stunned. She stared into the drink, then looked wonderingly at Freeman.

He said: 'If there's anything . . . anything I can do . . .'

For a while she could find no words. Then, as though a dam had burst, they came flooding out. 'What *kind* of accident?' she cried again. 'I just don't know anything . . . never told anything . . . where was he when it happened, what was he doing, what *is* it all? You can't just come in here like this can't just . . . where is he, won't you tell me where he is and why it had to happen . . . why . . . why? . . .'

'I'm not allowed to tell you anymore,' he said gently. 'But you can take my word for it that it's true. I'm sorry.'

'You're sorry. Yes. Sorry, but you can't tell me anything. Can't do

anything . . . can't . . .'

He put out a hand towards her. She flinched away. At last she took a long, long drink. It made her choke, but she refused to let the choking fit get a hold on her. She forced herself to say hoarsely:

'Well, you've told me. Perhaps you wouldn't mind leaving now.'

Freeman got up. It had been just as awful as he had feared. He wanted to help; but there was no help anyone could offer now. When he had gone, he reassured himself, she would cry. Cry for hours, all night maybe, and get it out of her system.

It was a nice, neat, consoling idea. He wished he could believe it. He had a feeling the ghost of Paul Foster was going to pace this room for a long time to come.

The sun inched its belated morning over the lunar surface. A ridge acquired a newly glimmering edge. A peak was blurred by a sparkling, scintillating halo. In the shadows of a huddle of rocks, light flashed off something that did not belong in the sombreness of that dead world.

Paul Foster opened his eyes.

He was half buried in slatey chips and a powder of grit. A promontory of rock had sheltered him from the worst of the blast. He lay where he was for a moment, not knowing how long it was since the universe had seemed to go up in one ultimate conflagration. Then he sat up. His head throbbed, his ankle felt worse than ever, and there was an ache in his right shoulder. But he was still breathing. In spite of the hail of pieces his suit had not been torn. He reached out and grasped a rocky spur, and hauled himself to his feet.

The effort was excruciating. He nearly went down again. Clinging to the rock, he stooped and groped for the rifle. It had all kinds of devices attached to it—a real multi-purpose job—but this was probably the first time it had been used as a walking-stick.

Paul's heart was hammering. All right, so there'd been an explosion, he'd had one hell of a shock, he was in pain from his ankle . . . but on Moon gravity he ought not to feel quite so washed out and incapable of movement, in spite of all that.

He walked a few paces, stomping the rifle down and making his one steady foot obey him. His head grew muzzy. Instinctively he took a great gulp of air and felt a surge of fear when so little came into his lungs. Then he realized: the supply was running low. Through a creeping lethargy he made himself reach over his left shoulder to detach the survival pack.

It contained a compass, a map, a batch of food concentrates, a

compact suit repair kit which no one with a severely gashed suit would have time to use, and four oxygen regenerator capsules. With wretched slowness he fumbled one of the little cylindrical pellets out of its slot and screwed it into the valve of his air container.

He tried another intake of breath. This time his lungs filled gratefully.

A few more steps and he was out in the full dazzle of the lunar dawn. He unfolded the map and turned it so that light would fall on it. He was comparing it with the compass bearing when, over the edge of the map, something plucked at his attention.

In the dust were marks of his feet and of the rifle. And crossing them, only a few yards back, another line of footprints led into the shadows from which he had dragged himself.

Leaning lopsidedly on his improvised crutch, he tugged the automatic from his belt.

Nothing stirred.

Hearing only the rustle of his own breath within the helmet, he shuffled one step forward.

The footprints hadn't been there before he came out from under cover, had they? *Couldn't* have been. He looked at them, looked along the jagged switchback of the rocky out-thrust, and pulled himself along to a dip in the barrier. He peered cautiously over.

Some instinct made him whip round.

The movement threw him off balance, and he was grabbing out hopelessly with his gun hand for support when the alien stepped forward and with contemptuous ease knocked the gun away.

Paul went down. The rifle jabbed up under his armpit. He lurched up again, trying to keep his weight on the good ankle, and swung the rifle over his head to smash it into the alien's helmet visor.

Tottering, he held it there.

The alien had the automatic in a steady, gloved hand. It was aimed to tear through Paul's spacesuit and through his chest.

12

MARK BRADLEY was sitting on the edge of his bed when Straker came into the sleep sphere. He stood up.

The Commander said: 'You don't look as though you've made very good use of the regulation rest period.'

'I don't fancy the kind of dreams I might have, sir.'

'Look, you know just how essential it is for all personnel to have proper sleep, proper food, proper recreation—the lot—if they're to do this job in peak condition.'

'Yes, sir.'

Straker folded his arms. He looked, as usual, like judge and jury for anything and everything that happened on this or any other world or satellite. 'This base is important,' he said. 'A vital link in our defence system. We've got to have the best people all the time—and all the time at their best. Right?'

'Right, sir.'

Straker's lips puckered. 'I'll be honest with you. I haven't been in any mood for sleep myself. I've got a lot on my mind.' He looked as though he wanted to pace up and down; but in the sleep cubicles there was no room for that kind of thing. Abruptly he went on: 'Whoever commands Moonbase has one of the most responsible jobs in SHADO. I'd like you to consider it, Mark.'

'You offering me the job?'

'Yes.'

'What about Lieutenant Ellis? When she comes back—'

'We don't tangle with points like that. Maybe we decide she comes back, maybe we find her another job when she's stopped blowing her nose. That's irrelevant. I want you to take over, so that right now and for any foreseeable future spell of duty I can rely on having an experienced commander.'

'I see.'

'Does it come as a surprise?'

'Not altogether,' said Mark. 'And does it surprise you if I say no?'

'If you're worried about this being just a stop-gap assignment, forget it. You get promoted, you stay, promoted. You're Control grading, not

just an astronaut. I want our executive team here to be kept up to full strength.'

Mark said quietly: 'Well, you've done your duty. You've asked, and I've given you the "no" you want.'

'What are you talking about, man—I've "done my duty"?'

When there was no reply, Straker snapped: 'Come on. You know what this means.'

'Sure. After Paul Foster I'm senior man. For the moment. The obvious choice, if you like.'

'So, I offer you command of Moonbase and you turn it down. Why? Mark, I'm asking you *why*.'

Mark touched his face, ran brown lingers over brown skin.

'This is why.'

'Don't give me that. Racial prejudice burned itself out five years ago.'

'How would you know?' Mark demanded fiercely. 'Oh, sure, maybe on the surface. A whole heap of rules were drawn up and everyone promised to be good. But deep down in people's guts it's still there. Maybe it'd never show on this base, on this job. Or maybe it would, some time I'm ordering a guy out on a mission. A time the chances are he won't be coming back.'

Straker was white with an inner fury. 'I'm not offering you some easy number. You want anything cushy and carefree, this isn't the work for you in the first place. I don't care if you're polka dot, I happen to think you're the best man for the job now and probably the best man for a long time into the future. Do you want it?'

They were bristling at each other like enemies rather than fighters for the same side. Mark was the first to relax. He nodded. 'Yes, sir. I want it.' He smiled a sad half-smile. 'But not this way.'

'Nobody wanted it this way,' said Straker. He jabbed his right thumb towards the unrumpled bed. 'And now get some rest . . . Commander.'

The alien was motionless. Impassive, glutinous eyes inspected Paul Foster as though appraising a specimen of some strange animal life. If he fired now, would he go on to carve chunks off his victim—to use human tissue for regeneration such as the aliens had experimented with before? Paul wanted to hurl himself forward in one last attempt to smash the creature's helmet and head in. If he had to die, he'd take one of them with him. Instead, humiliatingly, he felt himself toppling, felt pain lancing up his leg, and crumpled at the alien's feet.

Dizzy for a moment, he managed to get himself into a sitting position. The alien moved round him and crouched down, still with the gun unwaveringly pointing.

Then the other hand moved. It stabbed to and fro, also pointing, emphasizing something. Paul blinked. He wondered if it was a last threatening gesture, a warning that this was going to be the end and he might as well lie back.

He glanced down. What the alien was indicating was the air gauge on his left hip. The finger was wavering down towards the zero mark, meaning that the second supply cylinder was almost exhausted.

So the creature wanted him kept alive? As he opened the survival pack and extricated another capsule, Paul wondered what the plan could be. The UFO had been destroyed. There was no chance of his being carted off for dissection or any other purpose by alien invaders.

Unless there was another ship—the third ship from that original group, maybe—out there in orbit, biding its time. He inserted the capsule. The pointer flickered back above the safety marker.

The alien stood up. He made a quick check on the sun's position and waved Paul to his feet. Then, oddly casual, he slipped the gun into his belt.

Paul felt absurdly insulted. Did the creature regard him as no longer a danger: did he think that Earthmen were so easily defeated?

He took his time. Easing himself erect, he got himself into a position against the rock where he could brace himself and get a good purchase. He stayed there when the alien waved again, urging him to move out across the plain.

Was that weird grimace from within the liquid cocoon meant to be a smile?

Paul tested his right hand against the hard surface behind him, tautened, and threw himself forward. The alien raised a protective arm, but too late. Paul's full weight smacked into him, and as they reeled away Paul was grabbing for the gun. It jerked free. He rocked over on to his right foot, balanced, and raised the gun. Now it was the invader's turn to look into that threatening snout.

The hand came out again, not pointing this time but clenched. Paul's finger tightened against the trigger.

The alien's fingers opened. Lying in the palm were the bullets from the gun. Paul was not aware of having seen the alien turn the gun away to unload it at any time; but there, unmistakably, were the bullets.

He let the gun spin uselessly around his finger. The alien turned

away and began to plod across the bleak surface. Later in the long lunar day it would be impossible to walk like that: the killing cold of night would give way to a scorching intensity under which no being in spacesuit and helmet could hope to survive. No human being, that is.

The alien turned and waved Paul to follow.

Didn't he know about twisted ankles, about pain, about the construction of the human frame?

Paul groped round for the rifle. It was nowhere near. He let himself sink to his knees, scrabbling in the dust. Pain dazed him again. Had it been sent spinning when he fell . . . fallen over the other side of that rocky fence . . . been buried in the lunar dust? . . .

Again the alien beckoned him on.

Better to lie here and give up the struggle; or to go on breathing and hoping as long as there was air in his supply?

Automatically he began to move. Without the rifle, he couldn't even hobble. He dragged along on his hands and knees.

An hour passed. Maybe it was two hours, maybe three. The alien went stolidly ahead, but seemed to be adjusting his pace to allow for Paul's slowness. When they came to rocky ridges, Paul drew himself up and hopped along on one foot, pushing his hand against the rock, sure that sooner or later he would slip and tear his spacesuit.

A haze swam before his eyes. It couldn't be the air supply: it couldn't be in need of yet another recharge.

He squinted down at the gauge. It had dropped nearly to zero.

There must somewhere be a small leak. No way of tracing it now, no way of repairing it. And not much point in going on. If the escape was that swift, the remaining two capsules wouldn't last long enough to get him back to Moonbase . . . or to wherever the alien was heading. Maybe that was as well.

He tried to rationalize it all, to work it out in his reeling mind and reach a decision. If there was no point in going on, then why prolong the agony?

But instinct, the dogged refusal of any breathing creature to stop breathing, forced him to claw a third capsule free and insert it.

He went on.

They were heading in the general direction of Moonbase. Of that he was sure. For all the good it would do them.

Was the alien proposing to give himself up? That would be a great treat for Straker.

Paul saw a flat, featureless stretch of grey land ahead. Nothing to

cling to. He was on his hands and knees again. An eternity later, he was panting, near to choking; and groping for the last capsule.

After that it blurred into a kaleidoscope of torment. He heard voices, tried to argue some abstruse point with Straker, and at one stage found he was pleading with Tina—pleading with her not to go away, not to take a job on the far side of Jupiter . . .

There was an arm round his shoulders. Whose arm? He was in a bar, having a drink with Alec Freeman. They must both be drunk by now.

He settled his hip against a rock and got the real landscape into focus.

The alien was beside him, easing the arm from under his shoulders, propping him into a position that couldn't be called comfortable but was at least tolerable. Between them on the ground was the survival kit. It was open. The regenerator capsule compartment was empty.

Paul stared. He stared until it all began to go out of focus again.

Well, that about wrapped it up.

Something was being pushed against his stomach. Blearily he tried to protest. He got a distorted picture of the alien leaning closer, swinging a small container round from his own hip and trying to prod a connection into place.

Paul waved him off. He didn't want to be poisoned, or pumped full of green ooze or whatever it was.

The alien struggled with the valve. Nothing fitted. Why bother, anyway? The mountains of the Moon did a slow revolve and then began to spin faster. Paul closed his eyes. It was like being drunk, all right. Only there was no comfortable bar stood, no Alec Freeman. Just this grotesque creature with its evil eyes fiddling away with a valve and a clamp.

Inside his helmet Paul was conscious of a faint hissing. He tried to hold his breath. He didn't want to choke. His own private gas chamber —a wonderful way to die!

Then he found that his vision was clearing. In spite of himself the faintly acrid air was seeping in through his mouth and nostrils. It had an odd taste to it, but it wasn't poisonous. That was something Straker would like to know. It fitted in with everything else—with the aliens, from uncountable billions of miles away, being able to adapt, even if only briefly, to Earth's atmosphere. Yet that made no sense. Some day somebody would find out what it was all about, why the swine were here, why . . .

He looked round and saw the helmeted head close to his. It nodded

slowly, approvingly.

He was breathing. He was alive. He was ready to go on, if there was anywhere to go to.

The sun blazed on a rim of rock above his head. Out there it would be getting worse. But he wasn't dead yet.

He looked down and saw that the valve of his air supply was twisted through a clamp and linked to an alien-looking bottle.

Alien. That was exactly what it was. The creature had connected him to its own emergency supply.

Which made even less sense than anything so far.

Paul weakly put out his hand. At least they could shake hands. They couldn't speak, couldn't communicate, but that much they could surely do.

The alien stared. It offered no answering hand. It didn't understand.

Whatever the two races had in common, this gesture of solidarity wasn't included.

The main console was unoccupied. Mark Bradley walked into the control sphere and hesitated. The girls were watching the tracker screens, gossiping, occasionally sliding into silence and concentrating on some ghostly smear across a corner of the heavens until they were sure it wasn't going to solidify into something menacing. It was part of the usual pattern: for every burst of wild, deadly action there were weeks of routine vigilance and the feeding of accurate but meaningless data into all the magnificent array of collating and analysing machinery.

He went to the console and gingerly settled himself on the padded seat. Like a conductor, he thought, reaching for the baton without being quite sure what the next item on the programme was.

Joan Harrington played a little tune with agile fingers on the recording keyboard and said: 'Welcome, sir.'

Once it had been 'Mark' to all of them. But her voice was still the same, still agreeable, still in some way approving.

He snapped down the external communication switch.

'This is Control to Moonmobile 3. Ready for off?'

'Ticking over, sir.'

'Right. Start on Area 183. Peripheral survey and then a cross-hatch. Report on the half-hour whether you get a sighting or not,'

'Roger,' said Waterman's voice. And then, with friendly deference: 'Don't worry, sir. If there's any sign—any sign at all . . .'

It was the friendliness rather than the deference that counted. Mark sat back.

At his left elbow, Straker said: ‘You’ve sent out a mobile?’

‘Yes.’

‘To the UFO crater?’

‘Yes. To search for the wreckage of the UFO. I didn’t know,’ said Mark stiffly, ‘that I needed your authorization.’

‘You don’t, Commander,’ said Straker. ‘Carry on,’

13

THE CREVASSE was small as such things went in lunar terms. But it was too wide for Paul to jump. With two good ankles he could have made a leisurely run-up and, boosted by the light gravity, have soared over those eight or ten feet. As it was, he couldn't have got farther than halfway, followed by a plunge into the uninviting chasm.

He shook his head ponderously. The helmet made every motion ponderous.

It would have helped if he had known what the alien was thinking. He wondered what terms they thought in: whether they used verbal or visual concepts, and whether they dealt in abstract concepts or in subjective reasoning.

The alien indicated that they should sit down. Paul had no objections at all. His limping, crawling progress was slowly killing him. At least a jump into the crevasse would make the process a bit quicker.

The alien nudged him. Paul turned to watch as one gloved finger began to scrawl in the dust. At first the outlines made no sense, then began to cohere. There was a large circle for the sun and a smaller one for the Moon. Two blobs made by the stabbing linger established Earthman and alien. The swimming, unblinking eyes turned towards Paul were as inexpressive as ever, but he supposed that somewhere behind their moist blankness there lay a question.

He opened up his pack again and took out the map. When it was spread over the lumpy ground he indicated their position as nearly as he could estimate it. There was no guarantee that he was right: he had suffered too many spells of semi-consciousness amounting almost to a fever, had blundered tunelessly on with no sense of direction; but assuming that the alien had chosen a reasonably direct course from the scene of the devastation, the guess could not be too far off beam.

Their heads were close together, poring over the map. Yet they were light-years apart.

Paul prodded the point on the map where he felt they might conceivably be. Then he trailed his finger across towards Moonbase.

It was a long, long way.

The alien was moving his hands, spreading them apart and then

bringing them together, and making a sideways movement of the head that could conceivably be his equivalent of a nod.

Paul shook his head. The alien twitched and waved more vigorously. To make his meaning plain, Paul very carefully folded up the map and pushed it away. No good, he thought intensely, as though there might be some telepathic communication between them.

The alien re-opened the map and indicated that they should both get up and carry on walking.

'No,' said Paul aloud. 'It's not worth the effort. We'd never make it.'

The alien watched his lips. Even if the words conveyed nothing, he seemed to get the gist of them. He put his hand on Paul's arm and started to help him up.

'No,' said Paul again.

But the alien was taking his weight, urging the two of them slowly along. They halted on the very edge of the impossible, impassable crevasse. Again there was that queer jolt and shudder of the head. Interpreting this more confidently now as the alien's affirmative gesture, Paul solemnly shook his head to show that he, too, could be decisive. The creature ought to be able to get the message by now.

It either could not or would not. Paul found himself smiling, without a chance of the meaning getting across. Not so long ago they had been enemies. Now, without being able to exchange a word, they were somehow companions. They were going to trudge on towards Moonbase with no hope of ever getting there.

The alien opened a slim pocket of equipment which was presumably the equivalent of Paul's survival kit. It drew out a coil of hair-thin fibre, and paid out a few feet. Paul put out one hand to offer help, but the alien was already engrossed in its own scheme. It tested one or two of the misshapen rocks hunched above the crevasse, trying them for steadiness and for sharp edges. Finally it chose one with smooth contours and wound a loop of the thread around it.

It was a slow business. When more of the line had been paid out, Paul settled himself against the rock and touched the material to show that he would grab it, hold on, or do whatever might be necessary if anything went wrong. They wagged their heads ludicrously at each other, and Paul wanted to laugh, and again wondered if the cock-eyed snarl on the creature's flaccid face was an attempt to share the joke.

The alien stiffened itself on the edge of the drop and leaned outwards, taking the strain. Then it stepped out and down, feet thrust against the sheer face of the precipice, and walked slowly, rigidly down.

Now was a good moment to get rid of an enemy of mankind. All Paul had to do was slash the rope, or untie it. The end of another killer from a sinister, hostile world.

It didn't feel like that any more; didn't feel like that at all.

The alien was gone for an incalculable time. When it reappeared, it was proceeding with even greater caution up the opposite cliff face. There must have been a plunge of some thirty or forty feet to the bottom. It had gone down and up again, and reached a sharp lip that looked so close to where Paul was crouched yet so utterly unattainable.

The slender hair of line, invisible save for a spasmodic reflection of light, drifted up from below and tightened. When it was secured round a barren pinnacle on the far side, the alien waved Paul on yet again.

He took one glance down into the stygian gloom, and was about to shake his head. Then he thought what the alien had already accomplished, and was ashamed of his hesitation. If the creature had wanted to get rid of him, it could have been done long ago.

He perched himself on the edge of the gulf and put one hand on the line. Gradually he let more and more weight sink on to it. The thread sagged slightly but gave no sign of snapping.

Paul lowered himself on to the ghost of a ledge which jutted out a few feet below, gripped the line with both hands, and pushed himself off. His legs swung, the line cut into his gloves; he rested for a few seconds, then began to work his way hand over hand towards the far side.

The alien squatted perilously on the brink, waiting for him.

The sag became alarming. Still the line did not give way. But the last half of the journey, short as it was, demanded a grinding exertion of his muscles as he clawed his way uphill.

A puff of dust blew away from the side he had left, and floated downwards. The rock could saw through the line; and there were other, equally jagged, rocks below.

The alien had a hand out, waiting for him. It was only a foot away. Only six inches away. Paul reached for safety. Their fingertips touched. He felt the line slipping, and made a wild grab. The alien's hand closed on his. Both of them were going to go over. Paul knew it, fought against it, and rammed both feet against the side of the crevasse as he was swung brutally towards it. Their hands remained locked. With infinite care he shuffled one foot upwards, whimpering soundlessly to himself where no one could hear as pain slashed and slashed again through the other foot.

A final heave, and he was dragged over the rim, half dangling. He worked his way to safety with his knees and one free, clawing hand.

He lay where he was for a moment, then flapped his hand vaguely in the air. The alien took it again and helped him to his feet. This time the grasp did not immediately slacken. Slowly Paul went through the motion of shaking hands until the alien fell into the rhythm of it and responded.

The crevasse was behind them. But ahead lay, perhaps, many more like it. From here the vista was one of unbroken trouble—savage teeth, saw-blade patterns against the sky, insurmountable hills and fields of dust which might conceal a hundred pitfalls.

The alien began to walk implacably on again. If it experienced any emotions comparable to human emotions, it made a good job of concealing them.

Like Straker, for example. Paul laughed. It was a dry, cracked laugh. His lips were cracked, too. He explored them with his tongue. Skin rasped against skin.

The sun was harsh on the interminable world ahead. He would never reach the far side of the plain, let alone scale that low range of hills.

The alien looked back, slowed, and waited for him.

Waterman switched the anti-glare tints into the forward observation ports, and said: ‘Take her a couple of degrees over to port. There’s a bad fault area about ten miles on. We’ll need to go round it.’

The Moonmobile veered off at an angle, skirting a dustbowl and hugging what had once been a crater rim, now fractured in a score of places by later meteorites.

Waterman studied the plan spread out before him. They must be following roughly the route taken by Colonel Foster and Mark Bradley when they went off in the hoppers to track down the UFO. A long arc and then a straight run-in to the site ought to bring this mobile close by what was left—if anything—of the crunched mobile and UFO.

‘I see what you mean,’ said the driver, staring ahead.

‘Rough terrain.’

They lifted, bounced up slightly; and sprayed grit to both sides as they ran along the perilous lip of a ridge.

‘Join SHADO,’ mused Waterman, ‘And see . . . well, what?’

One side of the ridge was the same as the other. From all they knew, it was fair to say that one side of the Moon was the same as the

other. The only folk who could get dewy-eyed and sentimental about the romantic Moon were those who saw it from a green park on Earth, gleaming through the trees, aglow with lying promises. Once you'd seen one crater floor, you'd seen 'em all.

'Hey, sir—hold it.' The driver slewed the craft over and round, the brakes jarring, dust rising. 'It can't be . . .'

Waterman leaned forward. He narrowed his eyes and flicked the glare protector out of circuit. Light blazed down at an angle.

On the harsh, arid wasteland something moved.

A hump of rock cut them off, then it had slid past and the driver was pulling the mobile round. They tilted perilously on the tight curve and went rocking down the slope.

Now there was no doubt about it. The figure in a spacesuit was there all right, no mirage, standing up at an awkward angle, jerkily waving and then bowing as though exhausted by the effort.

It disappeared, cut off by a cruelly spiked ridge just too sheer and tricky for the mobile to surmount.

'Hold it,' said Waterman. 'Stop here. Bring an air cylinder.'

They snapped their visors down and dropped from the mobile to the ground.

There was a slanting path over the low ridge, no more than the edge of an inclined fault, but enough to provide a foothold. They went over the top as fast as they could go.

Colonel Foster was sitting down now, but summoned up the strength to wave to them again. He summoned up more than that: as though too impatient to stay where he was until they arrived, he floundered to his feet and lurched towards them, his arms going in a grotesque balancing act.

They met. Waterman put out a hand. Foster collapsed towards him. Through the radio Waterman said: 'He's out on his feet.'

The driver helped to lower Foster to the ground. Inside the helmet they could see his lips moving. He waved his arm in another clumsy gesture, seeming to point back the way he had come.

'Sure, sure,' said Waterman soothingly, though no sound was coming through.

The driver swung the cylinder from his shoulder and indicated to Foster that he should bend forward. The Colonel went on trying to say something.

'Take it easy, Colonel,' Waterman mouthed at him. 'We can't hear

you. It's going to be all right.'

Deftly the driver unclipped one of Foster's spent cylinders and slid the fresh one into place. It seemed to make little difference. Foster could breathe now, but he was still moving his head in a slow desperation and talking, talking vainly.

'OK, lift him up,' said Waterman.

They urged him to his feet and turned him towards the mobile. Foster began to struggle.

It was impossible. They couldn't just drag him away like this. He tugged an arm free and pointed back towards the sheltering cliff where, out of the blistering sun, lay his friend.

'Listen,' he babbled, 'there's an alien . . . a friend . . . he saved my life.'

Waterman nodded, regarding him as an hysterical case who had to be got quickly back to base.

Paul had glimpsed the Moonmobile and, at first, not believed it. Then he had seen it again. It gave him the last surge of energy he needed. He had patted the alien's shoulder, said foolishly aloud 'Stay here, just stay where you are, it's going to be all right', and then stumbled out to attract their attention. And here they were. And there was no way of getting through to them.

He caught Waterman's arm, held him still, and shoved his helmet against the other man's.

'A friend,' he said, 'back there.'

But even in his own ears he could hear that his voice was little more than a feeble rasp. He tried to lick his lips, but there was no moisture left on his tongue.

Waterman was infuriatingly nodding again. The two men lifted him almost off his feet and began to half-carry him along.

'We can't leave him,' Paul sobbed. 'Don't you understand? He's back there.'

Now they were literally dragging him along. With one furious twist of his body he freed himself and turned to go back. His foot turned under him and he went down.

Waterman bent beside him. Again their helmets touched.

'Take it easy, Colonel.'

Uttering the words one by one, grinding them out, Paul said: 'There's an alien. About twenty yards back. He saved my life. Don't you understand?' He shouted it: 'An alien.'

Waterman's expression changed. At last it had got through. 'An alien?'

'Yes. He . . .'

But Waterman was standing up, talking through his radio. He and the driver swung round to study the rocks, all bright silver and solid shadow.

Waterman drew his gun.

Paul shook his head and groped upwards with one hand.

Waterman began to walk slowly towards the rocks. The driver followed cautiously, half crouching, ready to hit the dirt.

'For God's sake listen. Listen. No . . .'

There was a flash of colour against the stygian hillside. The alien stood up and awkwardly raised an arm in what might have been a gesture of welcome, an attempt to communicate on terms dimly and uncertainly learnt from Paul Foster.

Waterman flicked the gun up and fired.

The arm slumped. The alien remained frozen upright for a moment, then collapsed.

Paul Foster sagged until he was lying prone, as limp as the alien. He had thought his body was utterly dried out, that there was no moisture his mouth or skin could summon up. But now his cheeks were damp. He was still capable of tears.

14

SHE STOOD with her back to the wall as though he were a burglar or some stray maniac who had burst into the flat and scared her. She was shivering uncontrollably. He wanted to put his arms round her, but sensed that if he as much as touched her she would scream, perhaps lash out at him in a frenzy.

'I know it's difficult to understand,' he said.

'Difficult? Yes, it's . . . difficult. I don't understand.'

'If you could just . . .'

'Just what? I'm told you're dead, then you're alive. I go through all of it, all that hell, and I survive because you do survive, even when you don't want to. And I get used to the idea of you being dead, because I have to.'

'If there'd be any way—'

'And suddenly you're alive again,' said Tina dazedly. 'A month later you turn up as if nothing had happened. I can't take it anymore. It's no use, Paul, I can't take it.'

Paul said: 'You've always known there were things I couldn't tell you. There still are.'

'And always will be?'

'I guess so. Until—'

'Until what?'

Until the world is safe, he thought. But he couldn't say it aloud because it would make no sense to her unless he explained a whole lot more; and that was the one thing that must not be done.

'Things'll get better,' he said lamely.

'With your job? That job, that comes before everything. Before me. It does, doesn't it?'

'Tina . . . I just can't explain. I'm sorry.'

'So am I, Paul.'

She had stopped shivering. She moved away from the wall. Now that the worst was over, maybe if he took it very easy, he could make things all right. It had always been possible before.

She stood quite still as he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed

her. He knew when their lips touched, fondly and fleetingly but for the last time, that there was no way of making it right. Not anymore.

He said: 'Tina.'

Almost imperceptibly she shook her head.

There was nothing further to say. Or, if there was, the words hadn't been invented.

Paul Foster left, and didn't trust himself to look back.

The ship that had taken Lieutenant Gay Ellis back to Moonbase brought two men home on leave to Earth. Freeman had organized their timetable on landing to provide the minimum delay. There had to be a routine health check and Dr Shroeder's usual debriefing session. Nobody liked the procedure. Everybody wanted to be through and out into the streets, into the restaurants and theatres and clubs; or to be off home for an ecstatic reunion.

There weren't all that many with a family life to return to. SHADO personnel were, on the whole, chosen for their independence: wives, families and inquisitive parents made things difficult.

Roper was an exception. Freeman watched him go into the debriefing room and made a mental note to watch the recorded run-through later. Something about young Roper made him uneasy. Men and women often came back from a spell on Moonbase slightly jittery, knowing the problems of readjustment to Earth gravity and Earth ways of life. They came back irritable, or euphoric, or unsure of themselves. But there was something more than that in Roper's apprehensive, haunted expression.

Maybe he was worrying about his attractive wife. Freeman could have told him he didn't need to worry. She had been faithful. She was a beautiful girl, and a faithful one.

All the same, it wasn't a good thing. A man with a wife like that didn't belong on Moonbase, maybe didn't belong in SHADO at all. They ought to have stopped him marrying.

How? Straker had calmly discussed the possibility of giving him amnesia treatment; but even Straker, after a few minutes' argument, had agreed that this was too much: SHADO needed disciplined forces, but not preconditioned slaves.

So they had let Roper marry. And now, like any soldier with an overseas posting away from his family, he was fretting. Which wasn't good for the job.

Just another little headache. Not only for Roper—for Alec Freeman.

He checked the incoming freight and passed on a number of

requests to Stores Department, then took the manifest into Straker's office.

The Commander said: 'I want to know what you think about Paul Foster.'

'He's taking it pretty hard.'

'The lunar incident, or his girl trouble?'

'Both.'

'That's why I'm thinking of sending him on a Skydiver assignment for three months. How does that strike you?'

Freeman turned it over in his mind. It fitted. He said: 'It'll be a good thing for him. Haul Peter Carlin in for a couple of weeks on the health farm, a stint on Moonbase . . . and let Paul organize the new Alaskan dock for Skydiver. That should keep his mind occupied.'

'Fine. That's how it'll be, then.' As a dour afterthought, Straker added: 'Women! . . .'

'Which reminds me,' said Freeman, 'I think we should look at Roper's debriefing.'

He explained his hunch, which wasn't even a fully-fledged hunch, just one of those prickly intuitions they all had from time to time: they were no good at the job if they didn't have them.

'Dissatisfied?' said Straker dubiously. 'In any special way, you think?'

'I just got this feeling—like an aura, if that's not being too fancy about it. Something's bugging Roper. Maybe'—it was only a guess, and he hadn't much faith in it—'he listened to Paul sounding off after that alien got shot. Maybe one or two of them didn't like the sound of it. Starting to doubt—'

'Doubt?' exploded Straker. 'Anyone in this organization who has doubts is for the high jump. Is that clear?'

'Don't *you* ever have any?'

Straker glared. 'I've got a job. To stop aliens hitting this Earth. I've got no doubts about that.'

'But when we talk about aliens, aren't we prejudging the issue? Paul thinks that creature wasn't so much unlike the rest of us. He felt we ought somehow to have made contact—to have shown respect to an enemy who—'

'Sure,' grated Straker. 'Sure. I'll do all of that, when one of them contacts us in advance, asks for landing facilities nice and politely, and sits down to explain how and why this shooting war started. I'm sorry that one got scrubbed out the way it did. But the main reason

I'm sorry is that I didn't get a chance to talk to it.'

Freeman nodded. Individual problems, individual tragedies paled before the destructive threat which the aliens had posed and which they had done little, so far, to counteract.

'Now,' said Straker, 'let's hear more about this Roper situation.'

There was the Roper situation, and the general question of allowing operatives to marry or not to marry. There was another request from a tracker girl in HQ who wanted to do just that—to marry. She was willing to undergo the amnesia treatment, so long as it didn't make her forget the name of the fellow she was going to marry. There were queries about stress symptoms after long underwater periods in Skydiver. There was a good suggestion from an interceptor pilot regarding warm-up of on-board computers. And there was a puzzling little matter of two hours unaccounted for in the Space Intruder Detector's automatic worksheet. Was SID writing a novel in its spare time?

Arduous routine, fiddling little details. Each one an essential brick in the defensive wall.

'Hit 'em first,' said Straker at one stage, 'and argue afterwards.'

That was how it had to be. A pinpoint on a tracker screen, the countdown alarm through yellow to red alert, the launching of interceptors, the blasting of an alien vessel out of the heavens . . . all their activities, every twitching nerve, focused on the incoming menace. Until the day when, as Straker said, the aliens admitted stalemate, and decided to ask politely for an appointment.

Freeman tried to visualize it, and failed. The picture of Earthmen and aliens sitting together at a table and finding out why they were enemies and how to stop being enemies it wouldn't shape up on the video screen of his mind.

Yet one day it had to be.

The alarm sounded suddenly. The intercom came alive. From across space the voice of Gay Ellis, back at her console, announced: 'We have a sighting.'

Personnel problems and routine checks were forgotten. Straker was on his feet, on the way to the nerve centre of SHADO Control. Freeman was close behind.

'Confirm Unidentified Flying Object . . .'